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Allegiances [As told by our protagonist]

[image]

<——— AshClan ———>

Leader:

Thistlestar - Black and white splotched she-cat with bright green

eyes.

Deputy:

Russetfire - Intimidating reddish brown tabby she-cat, probably kills things for fun.

Medicine Cat:

Harestripe - Brown tom cat with white paws. No stripes whatsoever.

(Apprentice - Fawnpaw)

Warriors:

Jayflight - Mottled grey and white she-cat, not great at talking her way out of things.

Smokewhisker - Giant grey tom with orange eyes and an appreciation for butterflies.

Lilypool - Really pretty brown and white she-cat. Really, really pretty.

Alderflower - Brown tabby she-cat with a superiority complex.

(Apprentice - Snowpaw)

Foxspring - Tiny, grudge-holding mottled ginger tom. Seems to hate everyone.

Vipertooth - Stealthy cream and white tom. Seriously, he's everywhere.

(Apprentice - Silentpaw)

Cherryshade - Sassy calico she-cat with blue eyes, not fun to argue with.

Sparrowheart - Calico tom with an admittedly comforting demeanor.

(Apprentice - Brackenpaw)

Mapleflight - Calico she-cat with amber eyes and a short attention span.

Sootfeather - Dark grey tom. Super boring, but I don't think he knows.

Blackpool - Easily angered jet black tom. I know from experience. Rogue heritage.

Rowanspots - Suspiciously calm white tom with red speckles. Previously rogue.

Slatefur - Pale grey tom, probably a better deputy than the deputy is.

(Apprentice - Swiftpaw)

Nightwhisper - Super awesome black she-cat with one white paw. Rogue heritage.

Whiteshadow - White tom with black splotches, just really cool in general.

Lark - Grey tabby tom, usually pretty fun to hang around. Previously rogue.

Sky - Pretty grey and white she-cat with pale blue eyes. Previously a kittypet.

Apprentices:

Fawnpaw - Overly adorable tan she-cat with white speckles. Previously rogue.

Silentpaw - White she-cat, born mute yet somehow still sarcastic.

Snowpaw - White bob-tailed tom with green eyes, eager to say the least.

Crimsonpaw - Easily bored calico she-cat with dark amber eyes.

Brackenpaw - Tortoiseshell tom, tries his hardest to act older than he is.

Swiftpaw - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat, constantly says hurtful things.

Queens:

Dawnheart - Grey and white tabby she-cat, stickler for rules. Mate is Slatefur.

(Kits - Greykit, Stormkit)

Brightwillow - Tortoiseshell she-cat, loud and sickeningly upbeat. Mate is Sparrowheart.

(Kits - None currently)

Frostshine - Elegant white she-cat with strikingly blue eyes. Mate is Rowanspots.

(Kits - None currently)

Elders:

Blossompath - Once pretty cream and white she-cat, blind in one eye.

Palewind - Pale tabby she-cat with yellow eyes, young but completely deaf.

Sandstep - Fluffy yellow tom. Not handicapped, just super super old.

<——— MossClan ———>

Leader:

Duststar - Brown, grey, and white tom. Oldest leader, somewhat forgetful.

Deputy:

Rabbitflight - Brown tabby she-cat with a bobbed tail. Who names these cats?

Medicine Cat:

Brightnose - Black and white she-cat with orange eyes, a bit detached.

(Apprentice - Fadedpaw)

Warriors:

Flarestream - Orange tabby tom with amber eyes, acts tougher than he is.

(Apprentice - Berrypaw)

Stagheart - Black tabby tom with white patch over his face, not very nice.

Reedlight - Black and red she-cat, seems to be the mediator of most disputes.

(Apprentice - Tinypaw)

Apprentices:

Fadedpaw - Stuck-up siamese she-cat with pale, icy blue eyes.

Falconpaw - Arrogant cream and white tom with hazel eyes.

Tinypaw - Tiny siamese she-cat with one blue eye and one brown one.

<——— BreezeClan ———>

Leader:

Hawkstar - Brown and ginger tom, very, very protective of his clan.

Deputy:

Onewing - Quiet tan tabby tom, doesn't seem to like to voice his

opinions.

(Apprentice - Coyotepaw)

Medicine Cat:

Heatherfall - Elegant cream tabby she-cat with a boisterous personality.

(Apprentice - Goldenpaw)

Warriors:

Iceshard - Silver tabby she-cat, just as cold as her name indicates.

Otterpelt - Brown tom with darker stripes, far too happy in my opinion.

Apprentices:

Coyotepaw - Pale brown tom with yellow eyes, previously rogue.

Goldenpaw - Upbeat Golden tabby she-cat with emerald green eyes.

<——— WildClan ———>

Leader:

Silverstar - Silver bengal she-cat, appears to be easily provoked.

Deputy:

Wolfsong - Large grey tom with white paws with steel grey eyes.

(Apprentice - Tallpaw)

Medicine Cat:

Owlclaw - White tom with multicolored speckles, talks really fast.

(Apprentice - Birchpaw)

Warriors:

Tigerfang - Aggressive orange and black tabby tom, brown eyes.

Ambersplash - Naive ginger she-cat, more than a little conceited.

Minnowpool - Friendly brown tabby she cat with white markings.

Adderscale - Brown bengal tom with piercing yellow eyes, scarily calm.

Apprentices:

Birchpaw - Snide cream tabby tom with brown eyes, yell a lot.

Tallpaw - Energetic, long legged tan she-cat with leopard spots.

<——— Cats outside the Clans ———>

-East City Faction-

Sunshine - Ominous black tom, faction leader. Has it out for me.

Thug - Giant grey and brown tom, Maine Coon, closest thing to a second in command.

Tags - Extremely violent Savannah cat. Unfortunately, she's also pretty.

Bravo - Black Bombay cat, everyone knows he's not right in the head.

Zero - Fluffy white Angora mix, apparently intellectually gifted. Tom.

Roach - Calico she-cat, Angora mix. Too good for the crowd she hangs with.

-South City Faction-

Alpha - Tom, leader of the South City Faction. No idea what he looks like.

-West City Faction-

Ghost - Pale silver and white tabby she-cat, intimidating faction leader.

Skeleton - Huge white tom with black stripes, second in command.

-North City Faction-

Jigsaw - Wickedly cunning Abyssinian tom, best not to cross him. Leader.

Huntress - Cream balinese she-cat, relatively calm, does most of the talking.

-Enclave-

Soot - Dark grey tom, leader of Enclave, a small Faction that accepts rogues and loners and trains them to fight.

-Serendipity-

Lotus - Cream American Curl she-cat, leader of Serendipity, a small Faction that will accept any and all cats into its ranks.

-Haven-

Foxy - Ginger she-cat with white paws, leader of Haven, a small Faction dedicated to peace that accepts only kittypets and non-violent cats.

-Kittypets, Rogues, and loners-

Duchess - White she-cat with a few brown markings. Kittypet.

Mason - Brown and white tom with blue eyes. Kittypet.

Pixie - Vicious brown tabby she-cat, rogue. Gets information in return for favors.

Freakshow - Ginger and white tom, rogue. Pixie's smoothtalking

partner.

Bling - Jet black tom, blue eyes. Trinket collector, a previous friend of mine.

Alabaster - Scrawny brown tom, constantly gets into trouble with Factions.

Gadget - Multicolored wandering loner, sometimes rescues cats and brings them to the appropriate Faction. Has immunity with nearly all Factions.

Gizmo - Calico she-cat with oddly turquoise eyes. Gadget's daughter and apprentice of sorts.

A/N: Finally done! That took a while. Remember that this is just an overview as the protagonist sees it, there are dozens of Clan and Faction cats that of course aren't being mentioned. As our protagonist grew up in the city, he also has a more expansive vocabulary than most Clan cats.

Hope you enjoy this new story!

Idea by Frost, cover by Frost, plot by Frost, description by Frost, allegiances by Frost, characters by Frost.

~CreditFrost

<------ Chapter One ------>

[image]

The city was swathed in night. Billowing clouds of smog blotted out the stars, and dozens upon dozens of buildings towered up towards the sky, jutting towards the distant skyline like great spirals of stone. It was something about the sheer enormity of it all that filled onlookers with a sense of awe, and in most cases, the dreaded feeling of insignificance that came with it. And yet, there was something about that dread that made it so much more spectacular. Perhaps it was the way that the lanterns cast watery light across paved roads, or the way shadows danced across the walls as if they were one living, breathing creature.

At night, the city was alive. It was a place of danger and hope, adventure and failure, enemies and less violent enemies. For Hero, there had yet to come a day when the place had not instilled those very feelings of reverence, and the city was as much a home to him as any home he'd ever had.

When he leapt from the edge of a tall building, or strolled along the narrow walls and shafts that spanned between the great stone structures, he couldn't help but feel an exhilaration that could compare to nothing else. And when he returned to his residence after the night had ended, with the pads of his paws scraped from the asphalt and his heart racing with excitement and vigor, he knew that he belonged in this place.

It was the following morning, after a night that more or less followed that same sequence of circumstances, that Hero awoke to the sound of frenzied yowls. He'd been leisurely napping on the windowsill of his partner's workshop, where the sunlight filtered in from a gap between the two buildings that stood adjacent to the window. He yawned, blinked, and stared around the room for quite some time. The yowls started up again soon after he'd gotten into a sitting position, and his ears swiveled toward the source of the

sound. Hero hopped down from the windowsill and padded across the hardwood floor, past the chassis of multiple odd devices that lay at random intervals about the room. A steady ticking echoed from the dozens of clocks that lined the walls, though the monotonous sound had quickly become comforting to him, and he often found himself unable to sleep without it.

The screeching only continued after he'd pushed his way through the door, which had been left ajar to accommodate his leave. He observed his that his food bowl was empty as he exited the workshop, and made a mental note to himself to grab something to eat upon his return to the workshop. The thought was quickly forgotten, as his pace soon quickened as his curiosity grew; he leapt onto the counter, stepping out through an open window and out into the morning air. A warm breeze ruffled his fur, though he didn't slow, nimbly jumping down onto an iron fence and balancing easily on the cool surface. The yowling was certainly cat-like, and as he continued towards the sound, he pondered all of the possibly exciting events that could be occurring in the world beyond the workshop. Focusing on his foot work, he noticed than an uneasy silence seemed to descend when he dropped down onto the metal surface of a storage unit with an audible *thump*, a couple of pebbles skittering down the side. With a few more steps he had reached the ground, and padded forward into the alleyway. The overhanging stone structures soon blocked out most of the visible sunlight, and Hero held his head a bit higher as a shudder ran down his spine.

"I didn't do anything!" Came a sudden cry, and Hero nearly jumped at the sound, fur standing on end. His ears swiveled toward the source of the noise, and he hopped up onto a pile of overturned trash containers, which piled up against a large stone wall. Standing on his back legs, he peered over the edge of the wall, tail lashing in anticipation. Without exposing himself too much to whatever lay on the other side, he glimpsed the form of scrawny brown cat backed up against the other side of the wall, ears hugging his skull in cowardice.

Another cat soon emerged from the darkness, with a second at their heels, and Hero glimpsed several more skulking in the shadows. He ducked a bit lower so as not to be seen, he watched the scene

unfold with quiet enthrallment. "Didn't do anything?" Came the drawling response, and Hero's fascination rapidly died down as he recognized the low-pitched tone. "You've done plenty, Alabaster."

The scrawny tom tried to stutter back response, then clamped his mouth shut, trembling as he felt his tail brush against the wall. "You scared, kittypet?" Came a sneer from shadows, and without warning a spotted she-cat leaped forward, pinning the tom to the ground. She leaned closer to his face, and Hero could see the wild fear in his eyes. "You should be." Her claws pierced the tom's skin, who whimpered in pain, screwing his eyes tightly shut.

This wasn't good. Blood rushing in his ears, Hero slowly lowered himself back onto the trash container. He couldn't fight off that many cats if they came after him, and he hadn't been able to determine exactly how many there were. Without making so much as a sound, he quietly crept down from his vantage point, mapping out the safest course back to the workshop in his head.

"D'you smell that?" Hero's heart skipped a beat, and he froze mid-step. His eyes scanned the alley for a smoke vent, or anything that could hide his scent. "Smells like kittypet," The cat concluded from the other side of the wall, and he heard a muffled sigh of relief from the scrawny tom.

"There's a kittypet right in front of you, mouse-brain," Came the jeering response.

"Gee, Zero, I hadn't noticed," The spotted she-cat spat.

Hero picked his way around anything that would make too much noise, frantically searching for something he remember having hidden in a pile of papers beside an air tunnel. Finally, he glimpsed the parcel wedged between the tunnel and the wall, and gently removed it. He unwrapped it hastily, and grinned in alleviation as the sunlight gleamed off the object's surface.

The first cat groaned. "Both of you, shut up," A male cat growled, and suddenly, the voices went silent. A gust of wind blew some of the paper scraps down the alley, and Hero glanced around at the eerily lit stones. His mind was racing. He knew this place like the

back of his paw, but there was nowhere he could get to in time. This could be his only chance-

"Hey!" Some cat exclaimed, and he could feel their glare on the back of his neck. Hero stared at the object between his paws for a moment, and his ear twitched slightly as he looked over his shoulder, smiling calmly at the black tom cat perched on the wall. The tom's smirk suddenly melted away, and his eyes widened in recognition. "It's the finder!"

"It's the *what*?" This seemed to have caught the attention of the remaining cats, as a spotted she-cat hopped up onto the wall beside him, hissing in disbelief.

Hero chuckled uneasily. "Tags, Bravo," He addressed the two cats on top of the wall, flexing his claws and taking a step backwards. "Long time no see, huh?"

Tags narrowed her eyes, bristling with anger. "Not long enough," She snarled. There was a muffled screech of pain from the other side of the wall, and the scrawny cat's whimpered faded into silence. Hero winced, but spun around as he heard a scraping sound, and found himself standing uncomfortably close to a fluffy white tom who had been soundlessly perched on top of a wide metal pole that spanned the alleyway.

"He's got a Timekeeper," The white tom remarked in a dull tone, though his eyes were trained on the object inquisitively.

"Actually, it's called a watch, but I appreciate your trying," Hero quipped, pawing at the metal band that lay between his paws. The tom bristled, but Hero whirled around before he could make a retort. One of the containers clattered to the ground under the sheer size of the cat who descended from the wall next, and Hero could barely keep from collapsing himself. His legs had gone weak. "Well this... this has really been a very pleasant chat, and I certainly would like to continue it some other time, but you all look very busy, and I really should be getting back-"

"Let's flay him to ribbons," Tags purred, flashing a malevolent grin in Hero's direction.

"Let's not do that," Hero began, aware that all four cats were slowly making their way towards him form different directions. There wasn't an escape. He was going to have to make one. "What if we work something else out? You're all intelligent cats, capable of making... *rational* decisions. How about I give you this Timekeeper, and... you *don't* kill me?"

Tags pretended to think it over for a moment, and then shrugged. "Or, you know, we could take it from you, and then kill you anyway."

"Yeh, that sounds much easier," Bravo agreed, "Don't it, Thug?"

The giant cat stayed completely silent, and Hero waited with bated breath, though he'd already pretty much predicted the outcome. "Kill 'im."

"Come on guys, we just talked about this," Hero mitigated, as all four cats began to circle closer to him. He took a few more steps back as he realized Bravo was distressingly close to his face, and the odd-looking black tom rested a paw on the surface of the watch that Hero had unwittingly backed away from. "Oh, I... I wouldn't do that if I were you." Hero warned, but Bravo only grinned and leaned down towards it.

"'S that so, kittypet?" Bravo scoffed, then gripped the watch between his teeth and yanked it from where it lay. There was a brief pause as a quiet *click* echoed around the buildings, and Bravo halted in realization. A steady creaking sounded about them, and an alarming amount of stones and debris suddenly cascaded off the side of a sloped piece of metal. Bravo gave a startled cry, and leapt back just as a large stone shattered where he had just been standing. The alley was filled with emphatic caterwauls as a raucous broke out among the cats, and in a flurry of movement Hero grabbed the watch, still with a thin piece of wire tied around the clasp, and fled from the alley. He vaulted over the nearby metal fence and sped off through the buildings, racing away as fast as his legs could carry him.

He heart the pounding of paw steps behind him as he ran, as Tags yowled threats from behind him. "Better run, kittypet!" She

shrieked, words laced with fury. "Finder power ain't gonna help you now!"He didn't slow down, sprinting down the narrow pass between the buildings with a speed he didn't know he had. He vaguely remembered having set up that trap moons ago for this very purpose, though in hindsight, he should have accounted for unavoidable chase scene that followed.

That, and the inevitable consequences that came with it.

A/N: Frost here with the first chapter of our new serious story! I'd love to hear any theories or guesses as to this story might go, and comment on how you liked this first chapter.

~Frost

<------ Chapter Two ------>

[image]

His breathing was soon the only sound he could hear, and his head had suddenly started to ache. Bolts of pain shot down his spine with every step he took, sunspots danced across his vision, and the watch dangling from his jaws rhythmically collided with his chest. He couldn't hear Tags' jeering any longer, but then again, he couldn't hear his heart beating either. It took far longer than he would have liked to realize that he was headed in the wrong direction, and the buildings were quickly become more sparse and further apart. But it didn't matter where he was going by this point, they weren't going to stop until he was dead. He racked his memory, trying to figure a way out. The next Faction territory was too far away, and even if he could manage to find one that didn't also want him dead, he wouldn't be able to make it in time.

A shadow passed over his head, and he quickly found himself passing under an arch that marked the edge of the innermost portion of the city. A wall stretched as far as he could see in either direction, and his heart dropped like a stone when he realized that there was no way to turn back without immediately being slashed open.

Lost in thought, he didn't notice that the wire trailing along behind him, still attached to the watch's clasp, had gotten tangled around his leg, and he promptly tripped when he attempted to jump over a metal rim protruding from the earth. He toppled to the ground, spitting as it continued to wrap around his legs and he slipped down the rise. Struggling to untangle himself and breathing heavily, he glanced up towards the hazy outline of four cats, who stood motionless near the arch he had run through. A distant clattering jogged his memory, and he saw the long snaking shape of the machine tracks that ran throughout the city.

As Hero watched, he saw all four of his pursuers staring uneasily

into the plains that stretched behind him. "Get back over here before I come get you myself!" Tags growled audibly, and though she had advance towards him, Hero decided to not overstay his welcome. He quickly scrambled to his paws and dashed away from the city, until the crunching of gravel beneath his paws turned to the crinkling of dried meadow grass and soot-stained leaves. He looked over his shoulder briefly, just to see Bravo's tail disappearing into the shadows of the metal storage boxes that lay near the tracks. Wearily, Hero padded towards a large, flat boulder close to where he had stopped, and laid the watch he still held between his teeth on its surface. He pulled at the wire, wincing as he felt it cutting into his skin. Blood dripped down his muzzle just as he snapped the remaining wire and pulled it from his legs and tail, and the shallow wounds on his forelegs stung when he tried to lick away the blood that had crusted on his fur.

The cats had not followed.

Were the tracks a territory border? He'd heard stories of wild cats who lived out here, away from the city. He couldn't imagine such a life, and he thought it ridiculous for the cats to be afraid of some imaginary forest cats and a big stretch of grass. Well, all the better for him, he supposed. Hero turned back to the boulder, buckling the watch's clasp and pushing his head through it so that it slipped onto his neck.

Satisfied, he give a short, decisive nod, stepped forward, and was immediately swathed in a torrent of fire.

Hero screeched in surprise, scrambling away from the flames that had suddenly leapt up from the grass and scorched his fur. Agonizing, burning pain traveled up his spine, and he dropped to the ground, rolling to try and put out the bright orange flames crawling around his fur. As he writhed, he felt his movements slowing, and through the pain and caterwauling he saw something black and sticky beginning to cover his fur.

"Hold on!"

The words were drowned out, and Hero's voice cracked when he tried to scream again. Sparks flew across his vision. His eyes

watered and his throat burned, and all he could see was the dancing of bright flames.

"Hey, look at me! Can you see me?"

Hero blinked slowly, and for a moment he glimpsed a blur of black and white fur. More agony, his head was throbbing. He tried once more right himself, then black flooded his vision, though the frantic yelling continued to echo in his ears. A last, warped yowl faded away in his head before everything went completely silent.

<———————>

Hero groaned, and his eyelids fluttered at the bleary surroundings. He huffed in discomfort at his aching limbs, and slowly looked around to try and figure out where he was. He lay there for a few moments, as he didn't yet have the energy to life his head, before eventually trying to push himself into a sitting position. He immediately regretted the decision, and it took all of his willpower to muffle a yelp of pain. From what he could see, he was sitting in some kind of earth and stone burrow. Roots held the ceiling of the burrow in place, and snaked down to the floor, where they'd been pushed into coils around nests made of bird feathers and some kind of green spongy plant.

He noted the precision in which the burrow was arranged. One of the thicker roots had been sliced open, and a clear liquid trickled from the gash and into a stone-lined basin dug into the floor. The same roots were used to hold up shelf-like clefts stocked with berries and leaves of varying shape and color, though what he found most impressive about the space was a small grass-woven orb that hung from another root in the ceiling, and contained three dimly glowing fireflies.

"D'you like the glowlights?" Asked a cat who had strode up behind him while he'd been marveling at the orb, and whose voice he faintly remembered between the painful spasms that had racked his body when the fire appeared on the plains.

Hero looked over at the black and white tom, whose yellow eyes were trained inquisitively on him. "Yea-," He started, but his voice

cracked, and he swallowed before starting to speak again. His mind buzzed. "How do you... make those?" He managed to croak out, slowly regaining the use of his voice.

The tom smiled in amusement. "We don't, the swallows do. They come and build nests like that in the trees every newleaf, so sometimes we send apprentices to gather them so we can use them for light."

Hero stopped admiring the orb for a moment to shoot the tom an inquisitive glance. "Apprentices?" He asked, suddenly acutely aware that he had no idea where he was, or who he was with.

"Oh!" The tom suddenly said, "I forgot about you, uh, blacking out and all. I'm Whiteshadow, and you're in the AshClan camp." He finished, as if in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"AshClan," Hero repeated dully, "As in one of the legendary forest clans?"

"Yup," Whiteshadow nodded in assent, though he seemed entertained by the description.

The was a brief pause. "I'm dead aren't I?"

"No," Whiteshadow replied curtly, rolling his eyes. "But you certainly tried your hardest."

Hero shook his head in exasperation. "I've run from angry, dangerous mobs of cats. I've leapt over spiked walls, fought off dogs, scaled impossibly tall buildings, and in the end I'm killed by a bunch of dried grass and doomed to an eternity in burrow land."

"Oi!" Whiteshadow suddenly jabbed a paw into his side, and Hero yelped in surprise. "That feel dead to you?"

"Alright, you've made your point," Hero snapped, moving his tail protectively over the patch of scorched fur, and scooting further back into the nest. "Well how am I alive, then? Last I remember I was covered in black sludge. Oh, and also on *fire*."

Whiteshadow huffed. "Well, you wouldn't have been alive at all, if

Lilypool and I hadn't found you and dragged you to a water pit. Do you have any idea how long it took to get all of that sludge out of your fur?"

"Who's Lilypool?" Hero grumbled, ignoring most of the tom's statement. As if in answer, a brown she-cat emerged from the tunnel the he supposed led out of the burrow, and sauntered towards the nest.

"The mystery cat awakens," The she-cat, quipped, halting a few paces behind Whiteshadow. Judging by the tom's acceptance of her arrival, Hero could only assume that that was the cat Whiteshadow was referring to. "He doing okay?"

Hero grinned. "Am now."

"Great," Lilypool griped sarcastically, turning to Whiteshadow. "Thistlestar wants to see you and your new smooth-talking friend below The Great Oak." She finished speaking with a swish of her tail, and left the burrow without another word.

Hero watched her leave, still beaming, and then glanced over at Whiteshadow. "I'm going to see the who below the what?" He lilted, and Whiteshadow sighed in amusement.

"You're funny, kittypet," Whiteshadow meowed, stretching and stepping towards the tunnel. "I know this is a lot to handle at once, but meet me outside when you don't feel like collapsing; and try and hurry. Thistlestar doesn't really do patient. Oh, and don't forget your ticking thing."

Whiteshadow gestured towards the watch, which Hero oddly hadn't noticed. He limped over to the shelf where it lay, almost completely devoid of damage. It had been polished clean, and there was hardly any dust that hadn't been brushed off. They'd brought it with them all the way from the tracks. Carefully, he slipped it over his head, exhaling in relief when he felt the cold metal around his neck. "It's Hero."

"Hm?"

"My name, it's Hero," Hero tried again, turning to Whiteshadow as he was about to leave. "And... and thanks. For not letting me burn to death." He finished, trying to sound as genuinely grateful as he could, a concept he wasn't exactly familiar with.

Whiteshadow smiled, giving him a passive nod. "Don't mention it," He replied.

Hero watched him disappear down the corridor, and once he was sure the tom was gone, padded over to the pool of water that dripped from the root. He peered at his reflection for a long while, observing the marks and burns on his pelt. He could see the faint scarring from the wire around his foreleg, and the charred patches on his pelt. And then he remembered what Whiteshadow had said, about him and that she-cat dragging him to the water. Sure, he'd been delirious during that time, but even if there'd been a water source he hadn't seen, he would have had worse burns than this, even in the time he'd been burning that led up to Whiteshadow finding him.

He gazed briefly around the burrow, from the herbs piled on the shelves to the firefly orb hanging from the ceiling, and then scanned his memory to remember the facial expressions of the two cats he'd seen up to this point. For a moment, he continued staring into the pool, and then the answer clicked.

"Magical healing sap," He concluded, sounding impressed and shrugging as if it were completely obvious. The headache he didn't realize he had immediately dissipated, and he half-limped half-strutted towards the tunnel with a newfound sense of confidence.

Blaze thought this was too much information and made me split this into two chapters. I object.

~Frost

<------ Chapter Three ------>

[image]

Hero stepped out of the burrow and into the murky world around him. A thick fog had settled over the camp, blocking out most of the daylight.

"How long was I out?" Hero questioned.

"Oh, not too long," Whiteshadow revealed. "We found you in the middle of the night, and spent the rest of the time trying to clean out your pelt. I think it's almost midday now."

Hero flicked his ears in thanks. This smog seemed thicker, closer to the ground than what he usually saw in the city. Perhaps it was the absence of skyscrapers that made everything seem so close.

Whiteshadow nudged him with a black and white paw. "Hey, Thistlestar is waiting for us! Stop staring at the sky like a lovesick she-cat." Hero let out a grumble.

"I'm moving as fast as I can!" Hero gestured towards his still weak leg with his tail. "Besides, I don't even know where the Great Oak is."

Whiteshadow rolled his eyes. "Maybe if you look around you'll notice it. It's not called the Great Oak for nothing."

Hero dropped his eyes from the sky and focused for the first time on the camp. Then, for the first time in a long time he felt dumb. The most distinctive feature of the camp was the huge withered tree that covered most of the area in the camp. It looked old but somehow not rotted, and the stump of the tree was still firmly attached to the ground, the roots from which he just exited strong and almost healthy. There were even some green leaves and buds coming from the branches though they looked ready to fall any minute.

The rest of the area was tree-free. Thick, grassy meadows stretched as far as the eye could see. The camp itself seemed to continue from the tree into a small groove in the earth, a hollowed out area that held many caves and dens. Hero could see curious eyes peering from inside the rocky clefts, and he realized that many of the Clan cats were staring unobtrusively, making comments to each other that were just out of his earshot. The long legged tom let it pass right by him. There were more important things to be done.

"I thought we *were* in the Great Oak." Hero commented to his guide. Whiteshadow flicked his tail.

"We have to go to the leaders den, which is actually on the other side of the tree," the black and white tom explained. "We just came from the medicine cat den. Our medicine cat, Harespring, is out right now otherwise you would have met him already."

"Alright," Hero acknowledged. "Lead the way then! Let's not leave your leader waiting." Hero knew firsthand why it wasn't good to leave authority figures to wait. The last time he did that, he almost lost a leg.

Whiteshadow led Hero around the tree to where a den was nestled between the roots of the tree. In front of it an elaborate layer of vines hung down to block the inside from the weather and immediate view. Whiteshadow stepped confidently up to the den and pushed his way through the vines. Hero hesitantly followed.

The inside of the den was comfortably cool. A plush moss nest sat in the far corner of the den, leaving open sandy dirt floor for the leader to converse with others in his den. Directly in front of them stood a pretty black and white she-cat.

"Thistlestar." Whiteshadow nodded his head to the leader. Hero noticed how their pelts were eerily similar in color and pattern.

"This must be the straggler. Welcome to our Clan," Thistlestar mewed.

"Thank you for rescuing me," Hero spat out. The words still felt weird on his tongue, but he was well aware of how these cats had

saved his life. She flicked her ears graciously.

"Come, sit with me. Tell me, how did you get onto the plains. I would like to hear the entire story." Thistlestar mewed. Whiteshadow and Hero settled onto the ground in front of her, Hero letting out a little hiss when his leg throbbed as he bent it.

"Well, it all started yesterday night when I was exploring my home, the city. I was wandering through the streets when I heard the cry of another cat..." Hero began his explanation of how he came to the plains. Thistlestar asked a few questions here and there, listening intently as he described his interaction with the Faction. Hero knew that the Factions and the Clans had some history, but he wasn't sure of the specifics. Until right then he hadn't even been sure that the Clans were even real.

"...So when I ran away from Tags to the plains I didn't notice the wire around my leg, and by the time I finally did I was in the middle of those fiery plains and next thing I know I'm trapped with a useless leg and on fire. That's when Whiteshadow found me and, well, you know the rest."

Hero finally stopped his exposition, throat slightly parched. He licked his lips absentmindedly, watching Thistlestar absorb all that he had told her.

"Sounds like you had quite the adventure last night," Thistlestar commented. Hero licked his chest. "I'm sorry for what happened to you on our territory."

"It isn't your fault," Hero mewed, then his eyes widened. "Wait- that fiery death area is part of your territory? Why would you claim that as your territory?" A shiver ran down his spine at the thought. Whiteshadow nudged him, shooting him a warning look, but Thistlestar let the rudeness go with a little flick of her tail.

"How do you like the area so far?" she changed the subject.

"Well I think it's very nice. You know. Except for the fiery plains. They *hurt*." Hero snarked.

Thistlestar ignored him further. "I know how difficult life can be in the city. The Factions are a formidable bunch." She murmured.

"Yeah, I try to avoid them when I leave my nest in the city." Hero acknowledged.

"If you like, you can always stay here," Thistlestar offered. Hero's ears pricked up with general interest. "Many cats in AshClan are rogues and runaways from the city. You would be welcome here."

The light brown tabby tom let out a little hum of thought as he contemplated her offer. It certainly would be nice to get away from the stress of dealing with the Factions. But as he thought about the city, his mind turned to the huge skyscrapers, sprawling expanse of buildings and his cozy bed in the corner of the man's little workshop, and he felt a longing in his heart.

"Thank you for your kind offer," Hero began in a wistful tone, "But I love the city."

She seemed almost disappointed but she nodded her head in agreement. "Well in any case, I insist you stay here at least until you can walk properly. It is too dangerous for you to travel home right now, especially with those Faction cats out for your skin."

Hero and Whiteshadow exited the den after a heartfelt goodbye from Whiteshadow and a warm dismissal from Thistlestar. Hero was surprised to see that it was actually sunnier than when he'd entered the den. The smog had mostly dispersed and the ground was bathed in light.

"She was nice," Hero commented.

"She's my mother, actually," Whiteshadow preened. "Don't you think she's a good leader?" Whiteshadow leapt forward excitedly before visibly restraining himself and padding back to Hero's side. "Do you want to see some more of the territory? I promise I won't take you to see the Burning Plains."

Hero blinked at Whiteshadow's spontaneity. As he mentioned the Burning Plains, a weird feeling curled in his stomach once more and

a tingle in his hind leg grew. Just as suddenly as they came, they left and he felt strangely curious as to their origin. He shook his head to dismiss the feeling.

"Sure. Why not? Let's go," Hero agreed readily. The two walked side by side out of the camp, Hero happily indulging with the warm sun on his pelt. The large buildings in the city meant that he had to move to certain places at certain times of the day to get any sun. Right now, however, with the mostly flat territory there was sun speckling every part of the ground, and the air smelled surprisingly fresh and clean.

"I'm a little sad that you aren't staying," Whiteshadow mewed after a few moments of silence.

"Why?" Hero asked.

"Well, I think you would be fun to have around," Whiteshadow said softly. "You seem like a genuinely nice cat, and I don't think we have enough of those in the camp. Well, not enough that don't just pretend to like me because my mother is the Clan leader."

The brown tom let his tail rest gently on Whiteshadow's back. "Thank you for saying so. I'm sorry, but I don't think I want to stay just yet." An awkward silence followed and Hero itched to break it. "Maybe you could show me the best parts of Clan life, and convince me?"

"I'd be happy to!" Whiteshadow jumped up and down like an errant kit, gesturing for Hero to follow him.

Hero was led through the grassland at Whiteshadow's heels, gazing at the bright lit meadows in wonder. After a ways of travel everything began to look the same to him. He turned around and was surprised to notice that he could barely see the Great Oak on the horizon.

"Where are we going?" he questioned.

"We are heading to the Spires. It's the rockiest area of our territory. I want to help you climb one. Just *wait* until you see the view from

up there! I bet you can't see anything in your city with all the huge Twoleg nests in the way," Whiteshadow babbled.

"That's certainly true," Hero admitted. He admired the tall rock structures in the distance. Some rocks jutted out from the ground in curved off points. Others were stacks of small boulders that reached towards the sky. Some were almost the size of a small tree. They were clearly naturally made and that made them all the more fantastic.

A quiet rustling seemed to catch Whiteshsdow's attention. "Oh look, its Foxspring! What is he doing out here on his own? I thought he had a patrol..." He murmured the last part to himself. Hero acknowledged a tiny, mottled ginger tom approaching them. His pelt blended nicely in the swaying grasses and Hero was sure that any other cat from the city would not have spotted him at this distance.

"Hello Foxspring!" Whiteshadow called out. The ginger tom seemed to hesitate before trotting his way to their side, and Hero immediately noticed the tom's nose scrunched up in disdain.

"What are you doing out here?" Foxspring said unkindly.

"I'm just showing Hero around the territory," Whiteshadow replied. "He's new. He just came from the city."

"Oh, is he joining the Clan then?" The ginger tom said, almost accusingly, yet looking bored as he asked his question.

"No," Whiteshadow began slowly, "But he is staying for a little while. He says he likes the city more! I'm going to prove him wrong," Whiteshadow finished with a little wriggle of excitement.

"The *city*? That dreary old place? No decent cat would want to live there," Foxspring sneered, "Just where a silly kittypet like you belongs."

"Quite frankly, I didn't ask for your opinion," Hero quipped, "But please, feel free to share more unimportant thoughts. I'm all ears."

The ginger tom seemed to take a new interest in Hero at the

remark, examining him from head to tail.

"Go back to the city, kittypet. We don't want you here," Foxspring dismissed. Before Hero could open his mouth to retort, Whiteshadow sprang out in front of him.

"*I* want him here. He is ten times the cat that you ever will be!" Whiteshadow defended. "I like him more then I will ever like you, and I've been Clanmates with your ungrateful hide for a few moons."

"Who asked you, Whiteshadow?" Foxspring snapped.

"Go scurry your scrawny self back to camp, or I'll tell Thistlestar that you've been skipping patrol duty again." Whiteshadow threatened. Foxspring huffed and lifted his head pompously, but he scurried back towards camp with an entitled swish of his tail.

"Thanks for that," Hero mewed, the word still tasting unfamiliar. He licked Whiteshsdow's ear in awkward gratitude. The black and white tom nudged him in return.

"Anything for my new friend. Now lets go! The spires are really close."

Hero gasped as they finally reached the spires. The rock structures seemed to spiral towards the sky of their own accord. Some were almost touching each other, and formed intricate arches above his head. Buildings in the city stood straight, specifically structured to be their own blocks of nests in neat little rows. These were wild and formed haphazardly, almost appearing to have grown that way.

"Welcome to the Spires! No fire here, just really tall rocks! Do you like it?" Whiteshadow cheered. Hero touched one rock with his paw and was gratified by its cool, hard touch. It reminded him of the hard city pavement that he was used to having under his paws, but more jagged.

"They are very nice," He commented.

They began walking, the spires casting shadows on the wandering cats. A cool breeze blew through the rocks, carrying the scent of

grass, granite, and... something else?

"Help! Help, please!" A faint cry was carried on the breeze. And his ears swiveled in the direction. Fearful, innocent - like a kit. It sounded like a *kit.*

"Do you hear that?" Hero asked, twitching his tail to get the other tom's attention. Whiteshadow had stopped to listen. As he did, the cry sounded again, even more distressed than the first.

"*Somebody help me!*"

The two toms looked at each other, eyes wide.

"That's Stormkit!" Whiteshadow exclaimed, "We have to save him. Come on!"

A/N: Chapter by Blaze! I hope you enjoy the territory and all the new cats being introduced. I think a lot of this book is going to be new characters and settings. It is quite interesting though! Tell me what you think! (Many thanks to Frawst for editing!)

<------ Chapter Four ------>

[image]

Hero's eyes flickered upward toward the origin of the yowl, his mind flashing back to the fateful morning where Alabaster had been tormented by the rogue groups of the city. "C'mon!" Whiteshadow hissed, his voice thick with worry as the tom started into a jog. Hero was frozen in place for a moment, but he quickly caught up with the black-and-white tom.

"Look! There he is," Hero shouted, turning his head upward to face the top of a stone spiral. A small gray kit was hanging by the tips of his paws, a loud screech spilling out from his open jaw. Whiteshadow's eyes appeared to have had stretched to three times their size.

"Wh - what do we do?" the black and white tom cried.

Hero ignored the AshClan tom, closing his eyes for a brief moment to clear his head. The green-eyed cat then opened them, gaze focusing onto the steep side of the stone spiral. In his head, a white path was traced out. Over these rocks, run across this. Take a jump upwards and hop over here. Hero had followed his mental instructions before he could process the information, and he was now teetered dangerously at the top of the stone spiral.

He could see into Stormkit's eyes now, and Hero took a small step toward the young cat. "Hold on," he advised, his words lost to the strong winds that threatened to push him off the side of the spiral. Hero repeated his plea, taking another step. The edges of his paws were now over empty space, and blood pounded loudly in his ears. *Thump.* He held his paw out to Stormkit. *Thump.* The small cat took it, still wailing like a newborn. *Thump.* Hero could hear the worry-tainted calls of Whiteshadow below. *Thump.* He pulled the tom up, swaying as his weight shifted from his back paws.

Before Hero could blink, he was back on the ground, pads slick with sweat and blood still pounding in his ears. "You—you saved me!"

squeaked the tiny kit, peering up into the tom's eyes. "Thank you, cat!"

With a small giggle, Stormkit scampered off in the direction of camp. Hero watched him for a moment before turning to Whiteshadow. The black-and-white tom's eye were stretched wide with shock that hardly rivaled the surprise that currently was locking every single one of the green-eyed tom's muscles to the ground. After a moment, the AshClan cat opened his muzzle to speak. "That was amazing!" he exclaimed loudly, jumping up onto four paws. Started, Hero stumbled back before humbly dipping his head and muttering a thanks.

"We should get back to camp," Hero spoke softly, his mind still haunted by the image of the tiny kit hanging off the edge of the spiral. This picture was accompanied with the ear-piercing scream of Alabaster. "I—I want to see if Stormkit's alright."

Whiteshadow's eyes flashed with comfort. "You saved him," murmured the tom, touching his nose to Hero's cheek. The serious tone disappeared just as quickly as it had entered the AshClan cat's voice. "I guess you really do live up to your name!" Hero had to force out a chuckle.

The toms started walking back to camp, but Whiteshadow seemed to never run out of things to talk about. '*How did you get up there so fast?'* was the first, followed by frequent persistence about the experience. The AshClan cat had informed him that even warriors didn't dare to climb the stone spirals because of their height and various dangers, and Stormkit had probably only made it up due to his small stature, only further deflating Hero's ego. He just wanted to lay down and get some rest. The lattice of burns on his pelt was stinging with a phantom pain of his time in the burning plains.

Finally, the two toms padded under the towering shadows of the Great Oak. A tortoiseshell she-cat rushed up to them, her eyes bright with anticipation. "You must be Hero!" she exclaimed, dipping her head briefly. "I'm Brightwillow! Follow me—Dawnheart would like to meet you." Hero cast a sideways glance at Whiteshadow, who shrugged helplessly and sat down, curling his tail neatly around his paws. With a small sigh, the tom rose to his

paws and padded after Brightwillow.

They circled the Great Oak, Hero's eyes on the floor while Brightwillow chattered excitedly. "Oh, you saved poor Stormkit's life! He's going to be hearing that story for the rest of his life, yessir'! Did you know that when they were only three moons old—Stormkit and his brother Greykit, that is—they snuck out of camp and managed to catch a crow? It wasn't any normal crow, though. It was ridden with disease, and the poor kits were sick all night!" she rambled, and Hero smiled politely while she continued to elaborate.

Brightwillow padded into a small den, ducking her head to avoid hitting it on the thorns above. Hero followed her into the opening, his eyes adjusting to the low level of light quickly. In the furthest nest, pressed up against the wall, a gray-and-white tabby was sitting up, her green eyes dark as she spoke quietly to Stormkit. A smaller tom was sitting next to them with a smug expression, and another she-cat was sleeping a nest to the far left.

"I told you, Stormkit!" called the smaller cat, who Hero assumed was Greykit. "You're not s'posed to be sneaking out of camp! Will you ever learn your lesson?"

"Apparently not," huffed the tabby, lightly flicking Stormkit's side with her tail. "This is the fourth time this moon you've gotten out, and now you've given yourself quite the scare! I thought that being stuck in the medicine den for a quarter-moon would be enough to discipline you, but you'll never learn, will you?" Ignoring her son's loud protests, Dawnheart turned toward Hero. "Thank you for saving him," she mewed, the lecturing tone gone from her voice. "Though I wish he'd fallen and knocked some sense into that berry-sized brain of his!"

"Hey!" Stormkit growled, shifting in the nest. "I was just looking for Slatefur! He promised me a *giant* mouse, and then I got distracted after seeing the stone spirals! They're *totally* cool, Greykit. You should have come!"

Greykit huffed at his brother. "Stop lying. You told me that you were gonna go find the stone spirals that all the warriors talk about, and Slatefur wasn't even mentioned! You're just an annoying little

kit who'll never grow up."

Dawnheart ignored her bickering kits. "Sorry," she apologized. "Well, Stormkit, you better scamper along and say your thanks before you and Thistlestar get to have a nice talk." Sighing for what appeared to be the final time, the gray-and-white tabby laid down in her nest, closing her eyes and circling her fluffy tail around Greykit, who let out a rumbling purr and flopped against the moss as well.

Stormkit stared at the floor. "Thanks for saving me, kittypet," he muttered, "I guess I really am dumb like Dawnheart says." His voice was so heavy with sorrow that Hero couldn't help but try to comfort him.

"You're not dumb, Stormkit," he meowed gently, touching his nose to the kit's cheek. "You're just eager. I'm like that too. Back in my home, I never like staying in one place for too long. I can't imagine being cooped up in her for months—er, moons on end." Hero added a small chuckle to the end of his statement. "That's why I'm here. . . I got too curious and had to run away."

Stormkit looked more apologetic now. "Sorry for wasting your time," the gray tom mumbled, staring at his paws.

Brightwillow laughed softly, ending the sorrowful conversation and entering into a more lightened one. "Well, let's get going, Stormkit," the queen meowed, nudging the kit in the direction of the den's exit. "We've got a leader to visit while your mother rests. She's very tired, you know. . ." Brightwillow's voice trailed off as Hero stared at his paws, still taking in the whole situation.

"Can we go hunting?" Whiteshadow asked, his green eyes sparkling with a newfound excitement. His statement earned a loud shush from the half-asleep Dawnheart, and with a stumble in his step, the white-and-black tom sprinted out the den, his fur on end. More wary of creating noise, Hero followed his friend into the clearing. The shadow of the Great Oak loomed above them, and Hero shivered slightly, his short fur offering little protection against the newleaf cold.

Hero considered the tom's suggestion. As soon as possible, he was going to leave and return to his master in the city. But, the AshClan cats had extended their gratitude in order to help an injured cat, and some prey could definitely aid in their survival. Hero didn't like owing favors to anyone, including the vast Clan that has basically saved his life. "Sure," he finally responded, lifting his head and meeting Whiteshadow's eyes. "We can go hunting."

Instantly, the tom perked up. "I'll race you to the edge of the spires!" Whiteshadow purred, dropping into a quick crouch, then exploding in a sprint toward their goal. Amused by the tom's antics, Hero started into a slow jog in the direction where Whiteshadow had went. Instead of exiting through a gap in the bushes, Hero ducked his head and bolted straight through them, earning a lead of a tree-length of two. He tossed a glance over his shoulder, seeing the AshClan tom's amused expression.

Laughing, Hero sped up his run until his legs were just blurs, kicking up dust. The long grass whipped at his pelt. In the end, Whiteshadow managed to sprint ahead of him as Hero gave up to his injured—but swiftly healing—leg. "I won!" shouted the black-and-white tom triumphantly as his paw touched the edge of a stone spire.

"It's only because I'm hurt," Hero retorted coyly, flicking his friend's side with his tail. "What do you have to hunt around here?"

Whiteshadow shrugged. "There's some mice and stuff like that in the bottoms parts of the spires, but watch out for the snakes. That rainstorm that came 'bout a few suns ago made some of the rocks lose. I'm surprised that nothing fell when we were here earlier!" His tone climbed octaves with amusement, and Hero found it hard to not laugh at the tom's kit-like playfulness.

"Alright," the tom mused, staring into the stone spires. "Let's go hunting." He was about to jog off into the tree-like stone structures, but a sharp mew distracted him. Foxspring was standing only a few mouse-lengths away from Whiteshadow, his expression curled with disdain.

"Jeez, shouldn't you be doing something other than fooling around

with your new friend," snarled the warrior, leaning forward to appear menacing. That approach didn't to work, considering Foxspring's minuscule body and high-pitched voice. It was like a kit trying to threaten a warrior. Hero found it difficult to stifle his giggles, and Foxspring sent him a look that could kill.

"We're hunting!" Whiteshadow mewed brightly, not missing a beat. "Sorry if our benefits to AshClan make you uncomfortable. You should go back to sulking behind the spires, though. I think you scared all the prey away with your expression!" He sounded innocent, but Hero knew that his friend intended each of his words to be as a sharp as the knives his master used to carve clocks. For a moment, Hero pictured returning to the city, a ticking time-piece hanging from his jaw, but he couldn't quite finish the image. There was one missing part—he couldn't see himself. There was a floating watch, his master, the roads, and his home, but he wasn't there.

Hero swallowed. He needed to hunt.

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With a grimace of pain on his face, Hero padded back into the camp, a trio of mice hanging from his jaws. He'd often caught mice in the alley behind his workshop, though these seemed smaller in comparison. A new scrape had been opened up from a falling rock, and Hero was exhausted from his long day. He just wanted to find a spot to sleep, then collapse into it until hedgehogs could fly. "Nice catches," commented Dawnheart from her position on a rock, and Hero couldn't help but feel that she was impressed a kittypet could have caught so much. Greykit and Stormkit were playing some game with a ball of moss in front of her, and the camp was much more alive with warriors wandering about than it was during sun high. A few even cast him subtly friendly glances as they passed.

Both of the toms nodded in response as they padded toward the freshkill pile. Hero dropped his mice, turning to Whiteshadow. "Where can I sleep?" he blurted. Before his friend could answer, a deep, resounding voice distracted him.

"Oh, you can sleep in the warrior's den for tonight," Thistlestar mewed, staring at Hero with an expression of amusement in her

green eyes. "So, now that you've tried out life as a Clan cat, what do you think?"

Hero cast a sideways glance at Whiteshadow; the tom's eyes were begging for him to stay. Hero recalled his friend's statements. *We don't have enough of those in the camp. . . I'm a little sad you aren't staying. . . He's new. He came from the city.* Hero could always go back to the city, but he was sure that AshClan wasn't going to give him another chance.

"I've changed my mind," Hero meowed slowly. "I want to stay."

A/N: This chapter was by Rio, and I hope you enjoyed <3 I suck at writing author's notes, so let's take a moment to appreciate Frost's amazing cover. Okay, moment over. Love you all <3 ~Rio

<------ Chapter Five ------>

[image]

Day turned to night, night turned to day, and a moon had soon passed since Hero had become part of AshClan. His wounds had mostly healed, and his fur had grown back over the patched areas in his pelt. Much had transpired since the day he'd met Whiteshadow in the field, and since then, he'd begun to adapt to the Clan life; albeit with a bit of trouble.

While he had no trouble learning the rules and techniques of his new life, Hero was plagued by memories of his old one. He often though of his twoleg owner with fond remembrance, and felt an aching in his heart every time he did. But he pushed past his wistfulness, and even Thistlestar acknowledge his constant effort and determination.

Besides, Hero found Clan life to be quite fun. The group of cats followed a single set of rules, something that Hero had not often experienced in the city. Foxspring had tried to give him trouble occasionally, but a glare from Whiteshadow threw off every attempt; as well as saving him from a swift kick in the ribs from Hero. With every new obstacle, Whiteshadow was there by his side, ready to crack a joke or leap to his defense. Hero couldn't imagine what his new life would have been like if Whiteshadow hadn't taken him under his wing, and he found that he didn't much want to.

These were the thoughts that ran through Hero's head as he lay awake in his nest in the Warrior's den, listening to the soft inhale and exhale of the cats around him. Slatefur, one of the Clan's more senior Warriors, had been Hero's mentor for a short time when he had joined the Clan. Hero had learned quickly, and now he often stayed up late to review the reads he'd taken on his other clanmates.

Russetfire, the Deputy, wasn't much for fun and games. Based on the way she took control of much more than she knew she could handle, and what he'd picked up from Clan gossip, Hero soon found

that she had been the mate of the previous deputy; until he was killed and she took his place.

Blossompath, a Clan elder, was a particularly interesting subject. She often told stories of epic tales, raging battles, and great Expeditions. Hero soon discovered that he was the only one who noticed that she'd been the gallant hero in most of her own tales, though she was too humble to reveal her triumph.

Hero was easily able to distinguish the characteristics of many cats in the Clans. But time and again, when he gazed upon Whiteshadow, he could tell nothing. He grinned and joked, and he performed every given task with practiced ease. Everyone loved Whiteshadow, simply because he was nothing but lovable. This is why it came as a surprise when that same night, Whiteshadow woke up suddenly, staring around the den in confusion.

"Whiteshadow?" Hero murmured quietly, at first smiling faintly as he stayed curled up in his nest, waiting for the tom to joke lightheartedly and go back to sleep. But no such response came, and Hero groaned as he turned to gaze upon the black and white tom. Whiteshadow's yellowish eyes met his green ones for a long moment, and then his whisker twitched in uncertainty. Frowning, Whiteshadow sank back into the nest, and Hero stared for another moment in concern, though not another word was spoken.

The sun rose the next morning, along with the foggy chill of Leaf-fall. One by one, cats emerged from their den, where Russetfire already sat on a low-hanging branch of the Oak, yowling orders to the dazed Warriors and Apprentices. Greykit and Stormkit bounded past Hero's paws, offering a cheery hello before racing towards the fresh-kill pile. Dawnheart smiled warmly in his direction from the Nursery, which Hero gladly returned before padding in the direction of the Great Oak's enormous trunk.

"Morning, Hero!" Nightwhisper chirped, and Hero mumbled a distracted response.

Many more greetings were uttered by the time Hero reached Russetfire, who glared at him in disdain. Despite his aloofness, Hero smiled in amusement. "You're late." Russetfire hissed.

"Yeah, sure," Hero grinned. "I'm just here for my patrol."

Russetfire flicked an ear, sitting up a little straighter. "Your *patrol* left here a while ago."

Hero's eyes widened. "What?" He asked in disbelief. White shadow was uncannily punctual. He always joined Hero on hunting trips and patrols. Hero hardly went anywhere without his friend. "That's impossible, Whiteshadow would have come to get me before it left."

The reddish she-cat growled something under her breath, hopping down from the perch and snarling at a small calico she-cat who approached her soon after. "You and your friend missed this morning's patrol. Jayflight and Sootfeather had to take your places, you better remember to thank them when they return," She snapped, padding past Hero with a swish of her tail.

Whiteshadow missed a patrol.

Whiteshadow *never* missed a patrol.

"Look who finally showed up," Russetfire said sourly, and Hero turned to see Whiteshadow padding past her with a vole hanging from his jaws. He set it down for a moment and gave her a quick apology, and after a few words were exchanged, Russetfire nodded and continued on her way.

"Where *were* you?" Hero asked plainly, casting him an anxious glance.

Whiteshadow blinked at Hero as he approached him, laying the vole down at his paws. "Sorry, I was in a bad mood and I lost track of time. I brought this back for you as a peace offering," he began, nudging the vole a bit closer and smiling in a friendly manner. "I'm much better now."

Hero paused for a moment and looked at him, but Whiteshadow's insistence quickly won him over. "Offer accepted," he purred, and Whiteshadow sighed in relief. "Just promise you'll tell me next time?"

Whiteshadow nodded gratefully. "I promise. Thanks."

The black and white tom turned to head over to where Russetfire was confronting a somewhat startled grey tom across camp, and Hero glanced down at the vole between his paws, and for a moment he saw it as the watch that he still wore around his neck as a token of sentimentality. "Whiteshadow?"

"Hm?"

"Are you sure you'e okay? You can tell me if something's wrong," Hero offered, and yet again, Whiteshadow seemed to hesitate.

"I'm fine, Hero. Really," he assured, then continued on until he was out of earshot. Hero looked at the vole one last time, considering the circumstances that had occurred. Nothing good ever came from peace offerings.

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There was a sudden gasp, and Hero moaned in irritation as his eyes blinked open to the darkness of early morning. The steady ticking of the watch around Hero's neck was muffled from so many days in the wilderness, though he cleaned off any rust or debris routinely every night. He missed the constant ticking of the clocks in the workshop, as since he'd begun to sleep in the Warrior's den away from the sound, he found himself a much lighter sleeper.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw the still sleeping shapes of his fellow clanmates, as well as the hunched figure of the tom in the nest beside him. Whiteshadow was trembling in the light of the dimly lit den, the fireflies in the three orbs that hung from the ceiling had gone completely still. Hero narrowed his eyes against the gloom, where Whiteshadow's quivering form stood outlined against the darkness, and carefully stepped closer to his friend. Aware of the silence of the den, Hero said not a word, and simply sat next to the tom, tail curled over his paws. Soon, dawn broke outside, and the pale blackness of the sky outside began to fade to dark blue.

"You're not okay, Whiteshadow." Hero murmured gently, and Whiteshadow's head shot up as he spoke.

"I'm fine!" Whiteshadow spat. "Mind your own business."

Hero blinked, taken aback by the sudden outburst. Soon anger began rising in his chest, and he had to will himself not to make some kind of retort. "I just want to help," Hero tried. "If there's something you aren't telling me-"

"Something *I'm* not telling *you*?" Whiteshadow growled, keeping his voice low. "What about what you're not telling me?!"

"What are you talking about? I-" Hero started, but Whiteshadow cut him off yet again, and Hero ground his teeth in frustration.

Whiteshadow spun to face him, and another cat stirred somewhere in the den. "How'd you get to that kit so quickly? How do you know everything about everyone before they even tell you? Why do you look at me like... like some *puzzle* that needs to be solved?"

Hero tried to reply, but he could't think of a good answer. He'd tried his hardest to keep his old life separate from his new one, and all it had resulted in was anger and confusion. Distracted from his original argument, Hero stood, and a sudden snarl rose from his throat. Whiteshadow's chest was heaving at the end of his rebuttal, and he turned and strode out of the warrior's den. A few more moments passed before Hero's anger fizzled out and he regained the strength to move, but by this time a few of the warriors had already been awoken by their argument.

"What's wrong?" Lilypool yawned, trudging towards him with tired movements.

"I don't know," Hero admitted, glancing at the she-cat over his shoulder. Watery light soon began to flood into the den, stirring any cat who hadn't awoken already. Lilypool frowned at his tone, but Hero had already walked past her and out into the clearing. The earth rose sharply around the sides of the camp, where the roots of the Withered Oak had eroded the soil and made a vast, sloping pit in the earth. Dew rested on the soft tufts of grass, gleaming in the early morning sunlight, and the breathtaking beauty of the camp overwhelmed every cat who glanced upon it. But as he'd suspected, Whiteshadow was nowhere in sight, and somehow it made the

magnificent view seem empty.

Hero pondered the exchange all morning, but didn't see or hear from Whiteshadow for the rest of the morning. Somehow, it felt as if everything were moving past him, and the AshClan cats seemed to sense his aloofness after a short while. Russetfire, who seemed even more bitter than usual, sent him out on two hunting patrols before sunrise to make up for missing the previous day's patrol. He'd found it hard to remain focused during both, but the two field mice and crow he'd returned with seemed satisfactory to the deputy. After dropping all three catches off at the nursery for the queens and kits, Hero chose a small hare from the fresh-kill pile and went to find his friend.

"Morning, Hero," Jayflight interrupted his search, blinking a pair of impossibly blue eyes. "I took a patrol for you yesterday, and came here to witness your show of gratitude."

Hero rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks," he huffed sarcastically.

"Close enough," Jayflight lilted. "Hey, you seen Whiteshadow around recently?"

"Actually, no." Hero replied, casting the grey and white mottled she-cat a questioning glance.

"Thought so," she remarked, "Well, he's in the leader's den right now. If you need him." She finished with a flourish of her tail, and then strutted off towards the path that led out of camp, where a she-cat named Cherryshade appeared to be waiting for her.

Hero seemed almost entertained by her spontaneous style of conversation, but something else soon caught his attention. He turned towards the trunk of the tree, where he saw two nearly identical cats speaking to each other as they exited the Leader's den; a hollowed out cavern inside the tree itself. He trotted towards it, expression creased with concern when he glimpsed the confusion painted across Whiteshadow's features. Thistlestar, who stood across from him, seemed obdurate to the outcome of their conversation.

With a swift leap, Hero leapt from the ground and dug his claws into the bark of a low hanging tree branch, pulling himself onto the surface. Thistlestar observed his progress as he cleared another two branches and finally reached the platform, a few large wooden boards supported by two smaller branches outside of the opening. Whiteshadow seemed to almost stare through him for a moment, but before Hero could open his mouth to interrupt, Whiteshadow stalked past him and began to descend the branches of the tree.

"Whiteshadow, wait-" Hero began, but Thistlestar rested her tail on his shoulder to stop him from going after his friend. "I'm sorry, we had a bit of a falling out this morning," Hero mumbled, but Thistlestar shook her head.

"His current state is no fault of yours," she explained, and Hero looked at her in surprise. Thistlestar exhaled, gesturing towards the entrance to her den. "Come inside, and I'll explain as best I can."

Hero nodded forlornly, and followed her into the hollow of the tree. It was surprisingly spacious and well-lit by the same firefly orbs as all of the other dens, and Hero quickly realized that he'd never been inside the Leader's den before. Another cat sat inside, a brown tom with perfectly symmetrical white markings on his paws. Harestripe was the Clan's medicine cat, and had supposedly been the one to treat Hero's wounds, though he had mostly been attended to by his apprentice; a previously rogue tan she-cat by the name of Fawnpaw who seemed far too mature for her age.

"Normally I wouldn't include you in such a private matter, but you're Whiteshadow's closest friend and I was personally hoping you could talk some sense into him," Thistlestar meowed, seating herself near Harestripe, and tapping the space next to her with her tail. Hero sat as instructed, and Harestripe cleared his throat, giving Thistestar a '*You didn't consult me on this*' glare. She only returned a sharper one. "Please remember that this is only for your ears."

Hero nodded, curious as to what the matter was, and Harestripe just sighed.

"Whiteshadow came to me just now to tell me that he's been given a message. Harestripe was able to interpret it as a prophecy from

StarClan, but Whiteshadow isn't being very open about it. Harestripe, if you could explain the grounds of this prophecy to our friend?" Thistlestar looked at the smaller tom inquiringly at the end of her statement, who nodded begrudgingly.

"Last night, Whiteshadow was visited by a StarClan cat, who delivered him a very urgent message," Harestripe began in an undertone, glancing about the den as if he thought someone was listening in on them. His ears flicked backward and his tone quieted as he continued on, with Thistlestar nodding at every few intervals. "He told us...that the Clans were in danger, and that the only one who could save us resided in the city. He made it clear that he was the only one who could complete this task-"

"-and insisted that he do it alone," Thistlestar murmured, and Harestripe dipped his head slightly in agreement with the Leader's words. "I understand that this may seem like a narrow-minded decision to make, but I cannot allow Whiteshadow to go off on some wild journey based off of vaguely stated information he received in a dream."

Harestripe guffawed at her last remark, seeming almost offended. "StarClan are our noble ancestors, if they have given us a warning then it must be so."

Hero held his tongue out of politeness, about to object to the tom's statement, but Thistlestar spoke the words crossing his mind even better than he could. "Whiteshadow was not even sure of the urgency of this mission himself. I will not send a renowned warrior and my son blindly into the city alone, and that is the end of this discussion."

Harestripe but back his next response, and instead dipped his head to the leader. "I respect your choice, but a biased decision on this matter could very well lead to the death of many cats if we are not careful."

Thistlestar flicked her tail to dismiss him, and Harestripe sunk into somewhat of an apologetic bow before he left the den. Thistlestar then looked at Hero, who had stayed all but silent during their exchange. "Do you care for Whiteshadow's well-being?" she asked,

and Hero nodded without hesitation.

"He's my best friend," Hero informed her, seeming proud of the title. Thistlestar smiled faintly, slowly rising to her paws.

"Good," she meowed, "Then promise me you'll do all you can to protect him."

Hero looked at her for a moment, realizing that Harestripe's words rang true to the leader. This heartfelt request was not made by a noble leader, but a caring mother anxious for her son. "Of course," Hero responded, and Thistlestar flicked her tail in thanks.

Thistlestar then straightened herself, and all traces of the previous sad smile disappeared. "You are dismissed."

Dusk arrived quickly, and as night fell, Hero found himself sitting awake yet again in the warrior's den, waiting for the dusk patrol to return. Whiteshadow's nest remained empty. A pretty brown she-cat ducked through he entrance to the den, padding in Hero's direction, though Lilypool's visage did not lift his spirits as it usually did. The she-cat didn't generally speak to him willingly, but much like every other AshClan cat, she'd do just about anything for Whiteshadow. Hero waited expectantly.

"The patrol's back," Lilypool began, her tone even, though Hero's fur bristled apprehensively. "He wasn't with them. Whiteshadow's been gone since moonrise."

That are a cliffhanger.

~Frost

<------ Chapter Six ------>

"Is it true? Is Whiteshadow gone?" Hero heard Greykit ask as he strode past the small grey tom, watching as Dawnheart nudged his cheek comfortingly.

"I don't know, little one," She replied calmly, though he could hear the concern in her voice. Hero shook his head, his pace quickening as he neared the base of the Withered Oak. Thistlestar was struggling to address a crowd of cats who appeared to have recently returned from a patrol, and with less than good news.

"Whiteshadow went off towards the Burning Plains, and we couldn't find his scent through the smoke," Slatefur explained calmly, though his tone didn't have the desired affect on the Leader. Thistlestar's expression hardened as she turned away, and Slatefur's voice rose above the murmurs of the cats around camp. "There's still hope, maybe a BreezeClan patrol found him-"

Thistlestar flicked her tail, and the cats below immediately silenced. "I've been running patrols since last night, and I apologize for my persistence," She began, then dipped her head to the cats below as she trailed off. Then she raised her head again, determined, and stared at the cats before her. "As all of you know, tonight is the full moon; the Clans will be gathering to meet and share news. If any of the other leaders have information on Whiteshadow's disappearance, this would be the best way to get it."

Slatefur hesitated before nodding, and Hero realized that Thistlestar hadn't told any other cat about Whiteshadow's prophecy. The leader cast him a warning glance, proving his theory, and flicked her ears at him plainly. That simple, somehow accusing gesture felt like a crushing blow.

"We'll find him," Russetfire assured the leader, making the statement sound more factual than comforting. Thistlestar smiled faintly, and Hero finally understood why she had been chosen as

deputy. Russetfire was the only Clan cat he knew to be completely objective.

Thistlestar cleared her throat to keep her audience's attention. "Russetfire, Harestripe, Fawnpaw, Jayflight, Smokewhisker, Lilypool, Sparrowheart, Brackenpaw, Sootfeather, Lark, Slatefur, Swiftpaw, and Hero will be attending tonight's gathering," She finished with a swish of her tail, and it didn't take Hero's intellectual abilities to sense she was on edge. "We're leaving now."

Lilypool, who had attended the patrol unbeknownst to him, scoffed at the leader's words. "We'll be there at sundown, the others Clans may not arrive until moon high-"

Thistlestar shot her a glare, and Lilypool was immediately silenced. "I've thought through the consequences of my actions," The leader informed her, "And my decision stands. Anyone not prepared to leave will be left behind."

"I'll go find Sparrowheart and Brackenpaw," Lilypool muttered, heading off in the direction of the training hollow located near camp. Thistlestar leapt from the branch on which she was perched, striding up to Hero with a deliberate gate. He felt his eyes shift in the other direction as she neared, until he could feel her breath on his face. The other cats cleared out of her way uneasily, and Russetfire began to organize the stunned cats.

"You promised me," Thistlestar meowed evenly, her green gaze boring into Hero's skull. The pale brown tom said nothing in response, and only ducked lower when her scrutinizing gaze moved away from him and he watched her paws as she padded towards the camp's entrance.

Hero swallowed dryly. "I know," he whispered to himself, so quietly that he could barely hear it. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes, just to feel the ticking of the watch against his throat. Then, trying to make himself useful, Hero glanced around and named off the cats who had already gathered near the camp's entrance with Thistlestar. Lilypool trotted up beside him, Sparrowheart and Brackenpaw in tow, and the mentor and apprentice continued past her towards Thistlestar.

"She yell at you?" Lilypool asked, eyes narrowed as she tried to read his expression.

"No," Hero hung his head, "Not exactly."

Lilypool inhaled sharply. "Ouch," She muttered, resting a tail on his shoulder. Hero flinched at the contact. "Cheer up, kittypet. We'll find him. Besides, you're about to go to your first gathering." She said lightly, and Hero dazedly followed her towards where the other cats had congregated.

Thistlestar nodded as the two final members of the party approached, and with a flick of her tail she signaled for them to move forward. Numbly, Hero stepped over the rise and walked up the roughly hewn stone steps that led out of camp. Every now and then, Lilypool would glance back at him to make sure he wasn't too far behind, but as they began their journey through the open plains, she charged off through the tall grass with the wind blowing through her fur. Soon Brackenpaw joined in, much to his mentor's disgruntlement, and Hero smiled wanly in amusement at their antics. Thistlestar remained stoic during most of the trek, and Fawnpaw soon shyly joined in with the coy tom.

"How much farther?" Hero asked as Lilypool finally slowed down enough to hear him.

"Tired already, kittypet?" She teased, putting a purposeful skip in her step. Hero rolled his eyes, though he was in fact exhausted, and didn't reply for fear of humoring her. "Well, you're in luck. See that rise over there, by the two scraggly trees? There's a big dent in the earth, just out of eyeshot. We used to call it 'Defender's Point', because when the founders of the Clans found this place, they used it as a fighting ground against the city cats. But now we just call it 'The Hollow'."

"Because it's a hollow?" Hero quipped dryly.

"Nope. Because before we used it for gatherings, it was a fox den, and the foxes used to drag cats there before eating their entrails and leaving their hollow corpses lying out on the middle of the pit," Lilypool replied brightly, beaming in satisfaction at Hero's surprise.

"How pleasant," Hero grunted, "What, was 'The Boneyard' taken?"

Lilypool huffed. "Yeah. Stupid BreezeClan."

"Quiet your chatter, mouse-brains," Russetfire hissed at the she-cat and tom, "We've arrived."

"Don't be so dramatic," Swiftpaw sniffed, bounding past the reddish deputy before she could retort. "I'm sensitive to ignorance, and I think you're making my allergies flare up."

Hero blinked, impressed as he saw that Russetfire didn't have a good reply. She growled audibly, just as the group of cats came to a halt. Thistlestar stood at the head of the group, outlined against the pale orange and pink of dusk, and Hero took a moment to stare around and marvel at the beauty of it all. "We're the first ones here," She commented distantly, as if it wasn't obvious that they would arrive before the other Clans. "The other Clans should turn up shortly after sundown, we'll wait here until then. Make yourselves comfortable."

With that, the she-cat turned and disappeared into the plains, the last Hero saw of her being a tail weaving through the stalks of tall grass.

"Where's she off to?" he asked quietly, more to himself than the cats around him

"She needs time to think," came Lilypool's voice unexpectedly from next to him. Hero turned his head to face her, and Lilypool did likewise. "Her son just went missing. She's the leader of the Clan." She moved her blue-green gaze back to the spot in the grass where Thistlestar had disappeared. "There's not much time to just have a quiet moment when you have to run about making sure things are going along well all the time."

"True," Hero replied, sitting back onto his haunches and curling his tail over his front paws. He looked out over the entire setting, letting his eyes travel over the plains, the two thin trees, the odd dent in the ground. This place was so calm, so serene. Hero could understand why Thistlestar had disappeared as soon as they had

arrived. This place was perfect to sit somewhere and think, with the sunset in your vision and a light breeze ruffling your fur from time to time. Maybe that was why Thistlestar had decided to come so early. She could use this time of waiting as her time of calmness, where there was nothing but the words of her thoughts to break the silence.

The cats slowly settled down, either alone or with one or two others. They conversed, practiced battle and hunting moves, or just stared about them, deep in thought, like Hero. In this way, they passed the time while the sun dipped lower and lower until it was completely gone and the moon rose higher to take its place. Finally, it hung directly over them, and the cats grew quieter as they waited for their leader and the other Clans.

Thistlestar arrived first. One second, she wasn't there, and the next, she was standing by Russetfire's side. "WildClan's close to arriving," she said, and almost before she had ended her words, cats began to stream into the area, causing the AshClan cats to rise and make their way towards the dent, were the WildClan cats were stopping. Hero followed, a weary sense of curiosity filling him.

A silver she-cat, at the head of the group, nodded to Thistlestar, and they together made their way up to the highest point in the Hollow, where the dent evened out. Hero watched the spotted cat, and from the fluid way she moved, the authority in the way she lifted her chin, the fierceness in her gaze, deducted that the cat must be the leader of WildClan.

Before Hero could turn his attention to the other cats of WildClan, who'd mingled with the AshClan cats, a rise in the noise made turn his head to see that another Clan had arrived, heading straight to the dent as WildClan had.

"BreezeClan," a WildClan cat next to him murmured, shifting as she tried to look over the other cats' heads.

This Clan's leader was a brown tom with splashes of ginger and intense pale yellow eyes that swept the cats as he padded up to the other leaders and sat down. He nodded a greeting to Thistlestar and the other cat before turning his scrutinizing gaze on the cats once

again, and it didn't take him long to find Hero. His eyes narrowed and he glared at Hero, who calmly returned his gaze.

His strategy worked, as it always did, and the tom looked away first, his bearing stiff as he continued his observation.

"Hawkstar looking at you funny, eh?" the she-cat next to him, who'd announced BreezeClan's arrival earlier, said. "He always does that to new cats. Always thinking that AshClan adding more cats means less power for his Clan."

Hero gave a slight nod, but didn't respond as he observed the cat. She was a lithe brown tabby with white markings and sparkling blue eyes who seemed to be a little overenthusiastic.

"So. I'm Minnowpool. I've never seen you before, and you have the look of a non-Clan cat. Where'd you come from? Are you one of those rogue city cats? A loner from somewhere far beyond?" she pressed, trying to continue the conversation.

"I'm from the city," Hero said carefully. "I'm - was - what you call a kittypet."

Minnowpool nodded. "Ah, I see-"

She was cut off by the arrival of the final Clan to show up. These cats did the same thing that the other Clans had, gathering in the dent and mingling with the other cats. Hero realized that this had to be MossClan. They were the only Clan left.

MossClan leader was a brown and gray tom with patches of white. He was very very old, as one could tell by the white creeping up his muzzle.

When he finally reached the place where the other leaders had congregated, the silver she-cat stepped forward and announced, "All four Clans are here. The Gathering will now commence."

Immediately, the chatter died down and the cats turned their heads to stare up at the leader, who dipped her head to the MossClan leader. "Duststar, you may go first."

The old tom shuffled forwards. "Thank you, Silverstar. MossClan has no problems to speak of at this Gathering. We've got enough prey. No problems with the city cats. That's all." He shuffled back to his spot.

"I will go next," Silverstar said. "WildClan is doing well this season. We've had more than sufficient prey. In fact, I wouldn't have had to report anything out of the ordinary if not for BreezeClan setting their scent marks quite a bit farther than the border onto our side." She cast an accusatory glance at Hawkstar, her amber eyes narrowed accusatorially.

"You know full well that that area of the forest is BreezeClan's," Hawkstar hissed. "You only were able to place your scent marks there because you managed to barely win the last leaf-bare, and you only managed that because our warriors were malnourished."

Silverstar opened her mouth to retort, but Thistlestar stopped her. "Silverstar, Hawkstar," she said wearily, her normally sharp green eyes dull. "Didn't we talk of this the last Gathering too?"

Hawkstar was quick to respond. "As if anything was resolved."

"As if you'd let anything be resolved," Silverstar shot back.

The two cats lapsed into an argument that lasted quite some time before Thistlestar finally managed to stop them, acting as a mediator.

Minnowpool chuckled beside him. "Honestly, I don't know why they bother. The exact same thing happens every other Gathering. Hawkstar and Silverstar begin fighting, and Thistlestar must stop them."

"AshClan has been doing well," Thistlestar announced. "Our cats are thriving, and there is no problem with prey."

Hero watched on. He knew what would come next.

"Or at least, we were doing well until a little while ago. Whiteshadow, one of our younger warriors, has gone missing." Thistlestar paused, and whispers passed through the crowd as she

continued. "He has not been seen since last moonrise. Does any other cat know anything about this disappearance?"

Silverstar spoke up. "I'm afraid that nothing about this has been reported to me from my Clan, Thistlestar," she said, and the other leaders echoed her.

Thistlestar turned back to the cats below, an almost unnoticeable note of desperation in her voice. "And no cat knows more? Step forward if you do."

Cats shifted, but none padded forward.

Thistlestar seemed to slump for just a second, but she immediately straightened once more. "Alright then."

Hero grew apprehensive. There was something about the way she held herself, the certainty in her tone, that told him something was coming up.

"Tomorrow, I will be sending a search patrol into the city to look for Whiteshadow." Her gaze, sharp once more, swept through the cats as Hero's heart began to beat faster. "The cats in this patrol will be Lilypool, Jayflight, Smokewhisker-" she paused for a second, finding Hero in the crowd and meeting his gaze "-and Hero."

This was written by Frawst and Duskie together. Can you guess where Frost's writing ends and Duskie's begins? XD, I think that you guys will be able to differentiate between our writing styles quite easily. ~ Duskie

UPDATE: You guys suck at this guessing thing. I started writing at the "With that, the she-cat turned and disappeared into the plains, the last Hero saw of her being a tail weaving through the stalks of tall grass." You should've known. ~Duskie

<------ Chapter Seven ------>

Thistlestar's gaze snapped away from Hero's as she continued speaking. "That is all I have to say. The Gathering is finished." With that, she turned and padded away, the other leaders following suit.

The cats around Hero surged and began to merge, voices rising up and overlapping each other. His short fur bushed out slightly as a dark tabby who reeked of rotten prey brushed against him, tail flicking over the tom's nose. Hero shouldered his way through the crowd, moving toward Thistlestar. Her eyes were sparkling with a slight hint of agitation, and Hero's pelt prickled as he padded up to her.

"Why did you choose me?" His voice was deadpan as he stared into the AshClan she-cat's eyes. Thistlestar froze in his gaze for a heartbeat, stopping mid-stride as her head moved in slow-motion to meet Hero's sharp glare.

She swallowed. "Well," Thistlestar began with a bite of frustration. "You promised something to my son. I expect you to protect him like you said, so that's the base of my reasoning." Hero's tail lashed back and forth, pausing at the peak of each stroke against the ground. His eyes narrowed slightly as the AshClan cat continued. "The cats beside you fit together. . . they know each other, they compliment each other's strengths and defend their weaknesses. They're the pieces to the puzzle of finding my son. But they are missing one thing that you possess with a strong ability. . . you know the Twolegplace. You know that place like the back of your paw, and I expect you to find my son." A hint of desperation made Thistlestar's words rise in a warble of begging. "Please."

Determination flooded Hero's eyes as he met her gaze. "I *will* find him," he confirmed confidently. "And we *will* bring Whiteshadow back." The tom rose to his paws, snapping around full-circle and padding away with a sway in his step. Hero spotted the other chosen cats in a semi-circle at the edge of camp. He quickly padded

toward them, heart threatening to pound of his chest. The tom's thin tail whipped back and forth as he padded up beside Lilypool. She tossed his a glance, hardly paying attention to the brown-and-white tom.

"—we will be leaving in a sun, at sunrise of course so we can have as much light as we can," Jayflight had been meowing. Her ears twitched, and she paid no attention to Hero as she talked. "Of course, Thistlestar talked to me about it earlier. She's desperate to find her son, so she turned to her *best* warrior." A smirk rose to the gray warrior's face, lighting up her blue eyes and casting a shadow of confidence on her slim body.

Smokewhisker looked doubtful. "Alright. . . will we be getting herbs from Harestripe?" His tone had a hint of sharpness in it.

Jayflight narrowed her eyes slightly. "We'll deal with that tomorrow," the long-furred she-cat replied smoothly, not missing a beat as she stared deep into Smokewhisker's yellow irises. She captured the tom in her gaze, holding him there for a heartbeat, before snapping her head to the side and stalking off into the trees.

Hero met Lilypool's eyes, who looked amused by Jayflight's antics. An expression of fear decorated Smokewhisker's flat face, and the gray tom got to his paws, towering over the smaller AshClan cats. Feeling dwarfed in his shadow, Hero trailed after the other cats, his heart thumping irregularly in his ears.

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Hero stretched out his paws, blinking the sleep out of his eyes as he padded out of the warrior's den. It had been a rough night of tossing and turning, and the moon's light seemed to slip through every crack in the roof. He had hardly gotten a wink of rest, so his body was sluggish as he padded into the clearing. Jayflight beckoned him with her tail, and the brown tabby tom jogged over to the threesome of cats. "Hi, Hero," Lilypool muttered. "Took you long enough to wake up. . ."

Hero held her gaze for a few moments before tearing his eyes away, anger drumming in his heart. *Ignore her. . . she's just trying to anger*

you. "Sorry," he apologized, forcing sincerity into his tone. "I was. . . tired. I was up all night, too nervous to sleep." He dipped his head.

Lilypool let a *hmph* and turned back to the other cats. "Thistlestar and Harestripe will be out in a moment to explain some more details." Hero's breath caught in his throat. *Will they tell them about the prophecy? I know it; I should be the one to do it.* He made a decision and cleared his throat.

"Before we continue, let me mention something. Before Whiteshadow left, he seemed very stressed out about something. He had woken up in the middle of the night and seemed. . . terrified of something. Something dark. Like he had a burden placed on his shoulders. Apparently, he told Harestripe that StarClan had given him a message. . . a prophecy that he was the hero. That he would save the Clans with the help of someone from the city," Hero swallowed, watching the looks on the other cats faces. "Whiteshadow *insisted* that he needed to be alone. Thistlestar didn't want him running off on a journey based on some. . . random dream, and she wants us to take him back."

They stood in silence for a moment. Lilypool was the first to speak. "Why wouldn't Thistlestar trust StarClan? Surely they cannot be incorrect. . . they are our ancestors, after all."

Hero shrugged. Jayflight was the next to comment. "When Thistlestar told me who was on the patrol, I asked about you. She said that you knew every inch of the city, and I believe her. But that can't be the *entire* reason, can it? Thistlestar seemed. . . hesitant. Knowing, like she was withholding information." Her blue eyes dilated with curiosity. "So, if you have some other reason. . . tell us about it."

Hero's mew was shaky as he realized he would have to start from the beginning. "Well. . . when I was a young kitten, I would have these severe headaches all the time. I blacked out for maybe a few suns, and a Twoleg found me. He sent me to the vet—they're like a Twoleg who fixes animals—and I got better quickly. But when I recovered, my mind was different. My paws know where I'm going before I do, I recall memories down to the whisker-length of detail, and my vision is excellent. Sure, they healed me, but they improved

me as well," he finished, looking at each of the cats in turn. "If anyone can find Whiteshadow, I can."

A heavy silence swept the cats off their paws, gluing their jaws shut and quieting them with thought. Hero shifted on his paws. Lilypool's tail swept back and forth. Jayflight's tongue swept the remnants of prey around her jaws. Smokewhisker slouched lower, trying to mask his height.

The silence was broken by pawsteps; Harestripe padded into the clearing, his brow furrowed and expression twisted with thought. "Come with me, warriors," he murmured, voice loud and clear. "We have a journey to prepare for." Hero's pelt prickled as he followed the tom across the camp. The five cats moved in a harmony, only broken by the ragged breathing of nervous cats. They entered Harestripe's den. He pushed forward five separate bundles of small plants. The bitter smells rose into Hero's nose, leaving a bitter memory behind. He leaned forward without words, biting into the stems and raising his neck so that they would fall back into his mouth. Hero swallowed.

"You all seem ready for such a simple journey," muttered Harestripe. "What lays before you is the unknown. Be wary, warriors. Be wary."

A collective murmur of thanks and agreement escaped the muzzles of the traveling cats. Jayflight led the way toward Thistlestar and Slatefur, who were standing near an opening in the camp wall. Hero swiped his tongue around his jaws, trying to escape the bitterness of the herbs. *It's not as bad as the medicine that my owner made me take,* Hero remarked mentally, flicking his tail.

"Whiteshadow's trail disappeared at the edge of the Burning Plains," Slatefur meowed, his eyes dark as he greeted the group with twitching ears. "You will set out to find him in the city. Your journey will be long and hard, but we selected you for a reason." Hero nodded along with the other cats. The tension was thick like smoke in the air; each gulp of air required a struggling breath and a pulsing heartbeat. The brown-and-white tom adjusted on his paws, avoiding Thistlestar's eyes. *Can I deliver what I promised to her?* His mind felt empty. He lifted his head and met her sharp, green irises,

feeling swallowed by the grass-like color of them.

Jayflight got to her paws, starting to pad away. Smokewhisker and Lilypool rushed after her, not bothering to glance at the other cats. Hero didn't move, standing still, captured in Thistlestar's gaze. "Thank you, Hero," Thistlestar meowed softly as Slatefur padded away. "Thank you for trying to save my son. . ." Her green eyes glazed over as the brown-and-white tom got to his paws and started padding away.

Hero swallowed, letting his muzzle hang open so he could collect the wafting scents of AshClan warriors. *Smokewhisker. . .* Finding the large tom's smell wasn't difficult, and the former kittypet scampered off into the waving grass. His paws stepped into the grooves of the AshClan cats that had come before him. *I belong here. I will find my place by bringing Whiteshadow back to where he belongs.*

"Hero, hurry up!" came Jayflight's sharp meow.

"Coming," muttered Hero.

They started padding into the grass. Hero stepped on a sharp rock, but he stayed silent as the pain echoed through his body. They saw prey, but it darted quickly under their feet. They did not speak, for the mission that Harestripe had laid in front of them was much too complex for simple conversation. They could hear pawsteps, but the cats dismissed them. A shared glance between Jayflight and Hero confirmed that it was meaningless fear.

Then they saw the Burning Plains. Hero tossed a glance over his shoulders, spotting a pair of pelts. Two small cats: Swiftpaw and Snowpaw. "Hey," he muttered, bumping his shoulder against Lilypool's. He mentioned behind her, and she folllowed his gaze.

"Swiftpaw! Snowpaw! What are you two doing here?" the brown and white she-cat hissed, her haunches rising slightly with anger. The pair of troublemakers froze in her gaze, mouths gaping open like fish and paws lifted mid-step.

"I know where you guys are going. Slatefur's my mentor." Swiftpaw mewed the tom's name with distaste. "I want to come too."

Snowpaw added on, "I only came 'cause I heard her leave the apprentice den, and I don't want her to go get hurt or something." Concern shone softly in his eyes.

Jayflight snorted. "Like we'd let *you* come. You're both just little apprentices!" Her tone was sharp and cynical. *I was once small like them,* Hero thought, reminded with an echoing pang of pain. *I was once glanced over and ignored.*

"We don't want to waste any time," Hero broke in sharply. "And I'm not going to waste it fighting with *her."* He gave a pointed glance to Swiftpaw. The she-cat recoiled with a harsh glare. "So, let's just take them. What harm can it do? Eight extra paws aren't going to be problematic."

"Two extra stomachs will," Jayflight pointed out, but the decision was made. Swiftpaw tossed a smirk at Jayflight, who flicked her tail and turned around, facing the Burning Plains. They started padding away.

This chapter was brought to you by Rio Incorporated! We're super-sorry for being late, but we've been rushing to get this done. ~Rio

DUSKIE WROTE EXACTLY THE FIRST FIVE SENTENCES.

<------ Chapter Eight ------>

The group of cats continued their journey. Mostly, they kept quite, except for the times when Jayflight gave a command and Swiftpaw made some snarky comment that ended in a mini-argument that Hero always had to break up. After some time, Hero grew tired of the squabbling and snapped at both of them, causing the two she-cats to fall silent, though it was obvious that annoyance still broiled beneath their pelts.

Eventually, the cats came to the Burning Plains. They stood out on an area where the land rolled upwards like hill, only much smaller, and looked out over the place that had scarred Hero. The large dry meadow stretched out far ahead of them, and Hero could see the buildings of the city rising at where the Burning Plains ended.

"What now, then?" Lilypool asked out loud, voicing the thoughts of all the cats.

"I suggest we go around the Burning Plains," Smokewhisker said, turning his head to face Jayflight.

"That would mean we'd have to go a longer way-" Lilypool began, but she was cut off my Smokewhisker.

"Yes, but for safety's sake. It wouldn't be that far out of our way anyways."

Jayflight spoke up. "Smokewhisker is right. We'll go around the Burning Plains."

"Alright," Hero agreed begrudgingly. He wanted to get to the city quickly and wasn't eager to prolong the journey, but he had to agree with the majority of the group.

With the decision made, they began to slowly make their way around the Burning Plains, skimming the edges of the meadow, avoiding the occasional fiery patch of ground. Eventually, they came to a place where two parallel lines of metal cut through the ground, with smaller pieces of metal placed horizontally over them. Hero had seen these a few times in the city, but he didn't go to the part of the city where they were very often. That was where the rogues prowled, and where they were, Hero wasn't.

A large tree grew by the tracks, casting shade in a large shadow all around it, and there the cats stopped to rest. The three warriors and Hero sat close to the trunk, their voices rising and falling as they discussed what next to do on their journey. Swiftpaw settled near them and began to clean herself.

Snowpaw sat a little ways from the group, his pale green gaze sweeping out over the landscape. He observed the area, eyes trailing over the burning patches of ground and fixating on the tall spires of the city. He wondered what it would be like over there, tall gray giant Twoleg creations rising above them, the Twolegs themselves walking and growling and yelling all around them, the monsters zooming right past. How could any cat live in such a place, with so much noise and bustle?

His thoughts were interrupted by a small growl in his stomach. The effects of Harestripe's herbs were starting to wear off. He lifted his nose in air and let his jaw drop, tasting the air for the smell of prey. It was hard to scent anything over the acrid scent of the plains, but the faint odor of prey was definitely present in the air.

He looked back at his Clanmates. Each appeared to be busy with their own things. He smiled as his eyes came to rest on Swiftpaw. The she-cat couldn't resist following the cats, and when he'd seen her slipping through camp, he had to go after her. And anyways, this was Whiteshadow. Whiteshadow was like a brother to Snowpaw. He'd always been the one to spend time with him in the nursery, always been the one who hadn't looked at him like a

servant to do his bidding like everybody else. Whiteshadow was his friend.

Well, for that matter, Whiteshadow was everybody's friend. There wasn't a cat in the Clan who didn't like Whiteshadow.

Snowpaw rose to his feet and began to pad away, following the scent of prey. It took him away from the tree, farther up the tracks, until he finally stopped when the other cats were about twice or thrice the length of the camp behind him. The prey scent was strong here, and Snowpaw pinpointed it as mouse. His stomach grumbled once more as he tried to find exactly where the critter was hiding and he finally realized that it was holed up inside the tracks. He stepped over one of the lines and crouched low, until he finally saw the mouse, which was huddled in a place where the tracks crisscrossed. It sent up an uproar of squeaks as it sensed him. He began to try to wiggle his paw into the space to get it out.

Swiftpaw drew her tongue over her paw one last time, and then pulled it over her ear. She cast a glance behind her to look at the warriors, who were still conversing in low tones. She wrinkled her nose as she saw Jayflight cut off Smokewhisker to speak up. That she-cat was far too assertive for her own good.

Swiftpaw glanced up to where she'd seen Snowpaw sitting and then looked away again before she'd realized that he was gone. She rose to her feet. Where had the tom gone off to? She made to tell the others, but stopped herself before she could. He'd probably just gone a little distance away, and anyways, it wasn't worth having them yell at him for walking a few fox-lengths.

She padded up to where'd he'd been sitting and began to follow his scent. As she did so, the smell of prey began to steal into her nose and she realized that he must've been looking for food. She looked up, and there he was, some ways in the distance, crouched smack in the middle of what Hero had said were the tracks. Swiftpaw let out an exasperated sigh and began to bound towards him.

Snowpaw was still trying to get to the mouse, but it had retreated farther into the tracks, just beyond the reach of his paw. He had just

decided to try to shove his paw deeper inside when a voice from behind him made his jump.

"Snowpaw!" Swiftpaw called as she reached the apprentice. "Why did you-" she was cut off by the noise of a distant clattering. She looked ahead, but the tracks bent sideways around a rise in the ground and she couldn't see past.

"Snowpaw, looks like the giant monsters Hero was talking about are coming-"

"I'm stuck."

"What?"

"My paw is stuck."

Swiftpaw bounded forward to Snowpaw. At the sound of Swiftpaw's unexpected mew, Snowpaw had been startled into pushing his paw deeper inside the slats of the tracks. Now the mouse was gone and Snowpaw's paw was stuck.

"Snowpaw! How could you get your paw stuck?!" Swiftpaw exclaimed.

"I'm sorry! You startled me!"

Hero's ears swiveled upwards as the noise of a commotion came to him. "What's that?" he asked, cutting off Lilypool as she'd been speaking.

She snarled at him, irritated that he'd interrupted her. "It's you not letting others speak. Now-"

"No," Smokewhisker said, rising to his paws. "I hear something too." He gazed at the others. "Cats."

Immediately, all the cats turned their heads to look for the apprentices.

And just as they'd suspected, they were gone.

"These apprentices," Jayflight growled. "What've they done now?"

Lilypool began to grumble along with her, but Hero stood with his ears perked. A sort of rumbling was in the air, seeming to make it vibrate slightly. He knew what that noise was. The train.

Hero padded away from the other cats and out of the range of the tree. And there, in the distance, he saw two small figures, crouched by the tracks. He narrowed his eyes. Were they by the tracks, or *on* the tracks?

Whatever they were doing, a train was coming and it was far too dangerous for them there. He'd told all the cats about the trains. Why weren't they moving away?

"I see them!" he called to the other cats before bounding towards the apprentices. In the near distance, he saw a giant maroon-and-brown train rounding the bend and his heart began to quicken.

He finally reached them, skidding to a stop. "What are you doing?" he exclaimed.

Snowpaw was frantically trying to tug his paw, which Hero saw was stuck in between the slats of the tracks, free and Swiftpaw was pacing by his side.

"I'm stuck!" Snowpaw wailed at the same time Swiftpaw exclaimed, "He's stuck!"

"The train's coming! We've got no time!" As if to prove his point, the train blew its horn and the bellowing noise echoed through the air. The pebbles on the ground near them began to rattle and jump and vibrations seemed to go up from the ground through his bones.

"Move!" Hero yowled, dragging Swiftpaw away from the tracks before jumping into the spot where she'd standing, crouching over Snowpaw and desperately trying to shake his paw free while Snowpaw began to panic, pulling his paw.

The train blew its horn again and Swiftpaw's eyes grew round as the rumbling beneath her paws grew louder and she turned to see the locomotive bearing down upon them.

"No!" came a screech from behind her and she turned her head to see the rest of her Clanmates running towards them. Jayflight was the one who'd yelled, and the she-cat quickened her pace, though there wasn't much room for her to go faster.

The cats came skidding to a stop just as the train reached them, hurtling by at a speed Swiftpaw couldn't fathom.

"No," Jayflight breathed. "No. That couldn't have just - no - that - no."

And just as suddenly as it had come, the end of the train went by.

And there were Hero and Snowpaw.

Unharmed.

"Snowpaw!"

"Hero!"

The AshClan cats rushed forward to meet their Clanmates.

"Oh, Snowpaw," Jayflight said, drawing her tongue roughly over the tom's muzzle. He leaned away from her, a bit shocked at the amount of care she was showing. "You foolish foolish cats," she said, shaking her head. "What were you even thinking, apprentices?"

"I just wanted to get us all some prey," Snowpaw said. The shock of what had happened was fading and his heartbeat was slowly returning to its normal pace.

"I went to see where he was," Swiftpaw put in.

"But then I got stuck," he finished.

Lilypool shook her head. "You two..."

"Sorry," Snowpaw hung his head.

Hero stood. His heart was racing too, and fear still coursed through his veins, but he didn't let it show to the others. "We'd

better get Snowpaw out first. He's still stuck."

Jayflight had seemed to just notice that. "Oh, yes. Hero's right. Now we've got to figure out a way to let him free."

After a little while of wrangling about, they finally managed to do so. And then, they set off once again on their journey, but this time with quite a bit more talking that was quite a bit less hostile. Their laughter started off tentatively, but eventually, it was echoing across the plains.

Hero in particular felt something feel a little different inside of him.

Because Hero had survived once again.

"We're very close to the city," Smokewhisker announced as they neared another hill, though this one a proper one. "It's going to be just over that hill."

The cats eventually grew silent as they trekked upwards. The place they'd been traveling to was so close now. Whiteshadow was close. Their mission, the purpose of all this - it lied right ahead.

Swiftpaw was first to reach the top of the hill. As she climbed up the last few mouse-lengths, she turned her head to call back to the others. "I've reached the-" she cut herself off as she turned her head back to look out ahead and stopped in her tracks.

The other cats caught up with her a few moments later, and their reactions were all the same.

The city spread out below them, an uncountable number of buildings rising high, higher than any tree that they'd ever seen, an immense number of multicolor-pelted Twolegs moving about, monsters roaring along the sprawling gray roads, emitting the noise of the forest multiplied a thousandfold.

"We've reached the city," Jayflight breathed.

"Finally," Lilypool responded. "This journey's been long enough."

But Hero knew better. The journey wouldn't end now.

It had only started.

So I finally wrote a full, proper chapter in Clockwise. How was it? ~ Duskie

<------ Chapter Nine ------>

The band of wandering Warriors streaked down the hill, watching the buildings get larger and larger until they began to obscure the sky line. Hero's heart let out a little pang as the pale gray metal structures came into view. While in the AshClan camp he hadn't realized how much he missed the city, but now as he stood in front of it, the memories were flooding back.

Before he could get sucked into one, he was pushed from behind and he stumbled forward. He looked back at Lilypool, who had run into him.

"Maybe if you didn't stand there like a newborn kit then I'd be able to walk down this hill properly." She snarked, expression unreadable. Hero's ears flicked back briefly before he shrugged.

"I'm sorry, I stopped to make sure you didn't fall behind or get eaten by a badger. It would be a shame to lose such a pretty face," he responded. She sent him an unimpressed look.

"Yeah, okay." She stumbled past him, claws digging into the hillside. This area was particularly difficult to navigate because of the Twoleg debris that littered the ground. Hero watched as Lilypool was forced to step around a tire that stuck out from the dirt. He decided to hang back a few pawsteps to watch the other cats going. Snowpaw and Swiftpaw didn't seem to have much of an issue and were enthusiastically darting around tires and over broken pots.

Eventually they sat at the bottom of the hill facing their first obstacle. It wasn't much of an issue for Hero, who had been jumping fences for years, but the looks on the Warriors faces spoke volumes.

"What kind of vines are these made out of?" Snowpaw questioned, poking the fence with a paw. The metal shuddered under his touch, chains of metal shifting around each other as that portion of the

fence vibrated. Hero noticed Lilypool flinch back for a moment before steeling herself to sniff at the chains.

"It's not vine," Hero explained. "It's metal, you know, that hard shiny stuff that humans use to make everything. It's actually pretty sturdy, so we can climb over it pretty easily."

The other cats didn't look convinced. Hero rolled his eyes at Jayflight's scornful look.

"Just watch me," he commanded. Hero took a few steps back, standing directly in front of the fence. Then he took a running start, jumping at the last moment into the air. His jump got him about halfway up the fence, and he caught himself in the fence itself, paws clutching the chain holes for support. His weight caused the fence to sway back and forth dangerously, but he ignored it with ease and pulled himself up to the top. He jumped back down, tail swishing in satisfaction.

"As you can see, the fence does sway with added weight so I advise everyone climb over one at a time." Hero recommended. "Snowpaw and Swiftpaw, you're the lightest. Why don't you go first?"

It took a while, but he managed to coax each cat over the fence. The apprentices had the most fun scampering up the swaying metal, but thankfully the Warriors didn't have too much to say that was negative.

"Now what?" Snowpaw asked. Hero took a look around their location. They were standing in a grassy clearing a few feet away from a low-lying brick building. Hero began walking towards it, peeking into the alleyway.

"Well I can't really think-" Hero began.

"Move! I'm the leader, and I'll choose the way we travel!" Jayflight snapped. She shoved past Hero and barrelled into the alleyway without looking at where she was going. As she did, she slammed into a few nearby garbage cans with a loud crash. The contents inside them spilled over the concrete and littered the floor.

The cats were silent.

Suddenly, Hero let out a guffaw of laughter.

"That was the funniest thing I've seen all moon!" he chuckled. Lilypool shot him a look. He returned one of surprise. "Seriously, a kit could have avoided that. In the forest you are quiet so the prey can't hear you, so why are you so noisy here?"

They all looked disgruntled, but Hero wasn't going to stop now.

"Why don't I show you how to navigate the city? You'll want to be quiet, after all, and I don't think we can spend time like we did on that fence for every new city obstacle we face."

Snowpaw and Swiftpaw were the first to agree with Hero's plan, eyes shining with enthusiasm.

"Alright then! This will be fun," Snowpaw said.

"Do you see this?" Hero pointed at the trash can with his tail. "This is called a trash can. Twolegs put their waste in them. They are usually in alleys, on street corners, etcetera. You'll find quickly that Twolegs put a lot of their nonsense in the middle of their roads, and that their nonsense is everywhere. Try to avoid it, yeah?"

Snowpaw snickered loudly, ignoring the dirty look that Jayflight sent him.

Hero darted away, looking down the two alleys. He gestured for the group to come to him with a flick of his tail. Then a few moments later, he winced as they stormed down the alley with heavy footfalls. After the cushion of the dirt in the forest, the hard concrete caused their pawsteps to echo in an amusing way.

"Can you try to walk... lighter? Less stomping around?" Hero asked.

"I'm sorry I didn't grow up in a city." Lilypool grumbled. "I'll be in a Hunter's Crouch through the entire journey."

"If that's what it takes," Hero snarked. She bared her teeth in a snarl as a response.

"Anyway! We'll be travelling through these alleyways for most of our journey, so you need to learn how to use Twoleg structures to sneak around. As you can see, there are a lot more shadows here then there are in the forest. Use that to your advantage."

The buildings were in fact so large that they blocked out most of the sunlight. Thick, black shadows stretched across the alley leaving convenient pockets of darkness that were perfect for stealthy movement.

If one knew how to navigate them.

"Come ON Smokewhisker. You should have seen that broken Twoleg thing from a mile away!"

"Swiftpaw, how many times do I have to tell you to not shove Snowpaw into garbage bags?"

"Lilypool, don't step on the houseplants."

"Jayflight, for the last time there is nothing dangerous about walking on a ca-er, monster!"

Hero was ready to give up after a few hours of instruction. He had somehow managed to land himself in a group with some of the most stubborn cats in history, and most of them refused to listen to what he said until they tried and failed by themselves. It was leading to many amusing moments, but he felt exhausted from the effort.

"Monsters are just things that humans use to move themselves faster. They are massive hunks of metal with engines in them. They. Are. Not. Alive." Hero repeated.

"...What's an engine?" Smokewhisker asked tiredly.

"It's something that I'm going to crush you with in a second," he snapped. "Don't question it!"

Snowpaw took in the looks on every cat's face, and he slowly backed away. "I think maybe we should find somewhere to rest," he suggested.

"How about under a monster?" snarked Swiftpaw.

As he said that, a memory crossed Hero's mind. He froze, mind finally piecing ideas together. Suddenly, he stood up.

"I think I know someone who can help us find Whiteshadow!"

Blazey here with the newest chapter! I hope every cat enjoys. @Frostfirewarriorcat and I spent a lot of time planning out the rest of the novel, and there's a long way to go!

Thanks to helloilovecats for helping me edit the chapter (#Jayflight is now a girl whoops).

<------ Chapter Ten ------>

The sun had reached its height in the sky, and back on the plains, Clan cats would be sharing tongues and basking in the soft, warm light. But in the city, the sunlight that filtered through the gaps in the looming gray buildings was cold, and the shadows that stretched across the rough stone walkways were colder.

The cats continued on, their paws landing lightly on the unfamiliar asphalt, though each one was beginning to feel a longing for the cool wind that whistled past the branches of the towering oak. Hero, however, swaggered forward with confident ease. He was used to the rugged surface of stone, and his paw pads weren't nearly as sore as the cats who staggered on behind him.

"My everything hurts," Swiftpaw complained, her tail dragging forlornly behind her.

Snowpaw had kept pace with her throughout most of the journey, and now his green eyes glowed with concern. "She means to ask how long it will be until we get to..." His eyes flicked about, scanning the surrounding area. "Wherever we're going."

"Don't apologize on my behalf," Swiftpaw snapped irritably, and Smokewhisker came to a halt in front of the other Clan cats.

"Hero, we're not used to this terrain. I think it's time we rest again," Smokewhisker suggested, and Hero glanced back at the group of cats, noting the frown that tugged at the corners of Lilypool's mouth as she stopped behind Smokewhisker.

Hero nodded at Smokewhisker, and the immense tom turned to gently nudge the ill-tempered Swiftpaw towards an area where the sunlight washed over the cobblestone. Snowpaw timidly followed

after the two, and Jayflight followed suit; for the first time Hero realized she didn't have any burlesque objection to give. These cats must have been truly tired.

Hero exhaled, gazing at the cats who he'd dragged along on his journey. Jayflight had curled up on a pile of newspapers, falling asleep in a matter of moments, and Snowpaw soon padded over the top of her, while Smokewhisker tried to groom something black and sticky out of Swiftpaw's fur. Lilypool sat atop a stone pillar, and their eyes met for a moment, though Hero quickly looked away from her and continued into the alleyways.

He remembered everything about this place. How the wind whistled past the wires that were strung from building to building, and the way pitch black night swept through the streets like the wings of a great, dark bird. His mood begun to lift as his paws carried him forward, away from the shadowed labyrinth of passageways that made up the majority of the boundless city. He leapt nimbly onto a ledge that protruded from a brick building, then sprung onto the pole that ran across the apex of the chainlink fence with practiced ease.

Three more bounds brought him to a cantilever that stuck out from between the bricks at an odd angle, and he crawled towards its center, letting his tail dangle off the edge and sway in the tranquil breeze. From here, he could see the roofs of the adjacent buildings, and the flaxen-colored light that glittered off the metal fixtures that adorned each one. His heartbeat felt hollow in his chest. He *belonged* here.

"Hero!" The pale tabby tom turned to face the source of the voice, blinking in incredulity as he spotted Lilypool perched on the top of the fence. She wobbled a bit as she tried to keep her balance, glancing up at him and adjusting her posture to appear less unsteady. "I'm coming up there!"

"No, you're not!" Hero objected, laughing under his breath in amusement. He stood, the beam shaking slightly under his weight, and began to effortlessly make his way down to where she waited. "Stay there, I'll come to you."

Lilypool didn't argue with him as her paw slipped, and she nearly topped off the fence altogether. The wire quivered as Hero landed beside her, and Lilypool's claws instinctively unsheathed to better grasp at the smooth metal. "D'you need some help?" Hero inquired, seating himself a tail-length away from her and tilting his head to the side in a manner that could be considered endearing.

"No, no, I'm fine," Lilypool assured him. She carefully tried to turn around on the narrow pole, but it shook as she did so and she stopped her attempt immediately. "I, uh... just wanted to stay and ask you a few things."

"Sure," Hero simpered, flicking his ear as if gesturing for her to continue. Lilypool stuck her tongue out at him, then managed to sit down on the top of the fence, and flinched at the touch of the chilling metal; though she tried to mask it with a confident smile.

Lilypool curled her tail around her paws. "I was wondering about your powers. You said you had some sort of abnormal finder power, but so far I haven't seen what it even works, and I don't understand why it can't help us to find Whiteshadow."

Hero pretended to look as if the question surprised him, though in all honesty, he had expected it sooner or later. "It's not some kind of psychic thing, if that's what you're asking. It's just - when I woke up in that workshop, I started to *notice* things. I can see the way everything connects, like a spiderweb of information; I usually just call it extreme observation," He explained, and Lilypool appeared fairly intrigued by the concept. "I'm just as confused as you on the subject of Whiteshadow. I can find anything I understand, and as far as I know, I understand everything. No matter who they are, everyone shares the same basic qualities, the same instinct to put themselves before everyone else."

"But Whiteshadow doesn't," Lilypool concluded, appearing to comprehend his implication. "He never does anything for himself."

Hero nodded. "Exactly. He's-"

"Completely unpredictable," Lilypool concluded. There was a moment of quiet, and then Lilypool looked back up at him, as if to

pose another question. Then another alarmingly loud voice rang out and interrupted her.

"Hey!" Swiftpaw yowled, and Lilypool nearly slipped from her perch. The two cats glanced down at Swiftpaw ,and Lilypool bristling in annoyance. "I think I found the cat you were talking about!"

"Bling?" Came Hero's incredulous reply. "I doubt he'd be near here."

Swiftpaw swished her tail impatiently. "He called Smokewhisker an inconsiderate bread-munch."

Hero sighed. "Right, that's him," He decided, hopping down from the fence with a muffled 'thud'. Lilypool followed, landing with considerably less finesse, then trotted off ahead of him. "Come on then, you two."

"What's a bread?" Swiftpaw whispered to Snowpaw as the three cats returned to the rest of their group, though the apprentice only flicked his tail to indicate equal confusion.

"Bling!" Hero called out to the jet black tom, who appeared to have been blaring incomprehensible insults at an unnervingly calm Smokewhisker. The tom turned to Hero as he approached, and suddenly grinned as he recognized him.

"Hero! Long time no see, eh, friend?" Bling began, ignoring Hero's resulting grimace. "Just ran into this great big oaf, we got into a bit of a scuffle." He then glared directly at Smokewhisker, who rolled his eyes, remaining completely unperturbed.

"Told ya," Swiftpaw chirped, and Lilypool shoved her away from the gathering of cats.

"Listen, Bling," Hero started, glancing at the surrounding area before stepping closer to him. "We need information on a cat who may have passed through here, black and white patched tom by the name of Whiteshadow. Thought you might be the cat to ask."

Bling straightened his posture, appearing flattered by the statement. "Well, my knowledge doesn't come easy," He boasted, curling his

tail over his paws. "I may know something about Whiteshadow. But if you want information from me, you're going to have to get me something in return - you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

Swiftpaw mouthed the word 'What?' from where she set a few tail-lengths behind Hero.

"Bling, we really don't have time for detours," Hero clarified.

Bling scrunched up his nose. "Now you're sore at me."

"I'm not-" Hero stopped himself mid-sentence. There was no arguing with this cat, he knew that from experience. He sighed audibly, though his tail lashed in veiled agitation. "Fine. Tell us what you need."

"Good on you," Bling piped up, and his eyes were slowly drawn to the watch that was clasped around Hero's neck. "How about that?"

"*No.*" Hero snapped.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding," Bling assured him, seeming entertained with himself. "I know you'd never part with that. No, there's something else I need - something that was stolen from me."

"And what would that be?" Hero furthered, though he sounded relieved.

Bling looked thoughtful for a moment, a behavior which Hero found odd, all things considered, though so be fair everything about this cat was odd. "It's a gold sort of metal chain, with these really shiny rocks embedded in it."

"A necklace," Hero offered.

Bling nodded definitively, grinning in return. "That's the one."

Hero bit back his next retort, and instead inhaled, readjusting his composure. "So what happened to your necklace?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't need you," Bling reasoned, and Hero groaned in exasperation. "You know where to find me." He added, and

without another word, trotted off down the alleyway, where his pelt melted into the shadows and he vanished completely.

A few moments of silence followed as the cats exchanged confused and apprehensive glances. "I'll go wake Jayflight," Smokewhisker muttered, padding towards where the grey tabby she-cat lay, as she had slept throughout the entire exchange.

Swiftpaw scratched at a spot behind her ear. "What's so important about a 'necklace', anyways?"

"They're like currency," Hero began, only to realize that the Clan cats probably didn't know the meaning of the word. "Different items hold value to certain groups of cats, like gangs and factions. They can be used to negotiate peace and barter, but they're also prized possessions, and stealing them could easily result in conflict. Necklaces, watches, and bracelets are among the items that hold the most worth, but cats often try to acquire more useful things like leather bindings and scraps of metal."

Swiftpaw blinked. "I understood about half of that."

"What you're saying is that different groups of cats hoard these things," Snowpaw meowed thoughtfully, seating himself by Swiftpaw's side. "So, don't we just have to find a group of cats?"

"What'd you wake me up for?" Jayflight mumbled, padding up to the rest of the group.

Hero considered Snowpaw's words, admiring how simplistic his thoughts were.

Wait - but it *was* that simple.

"Follow me, I think I might know who could have stolen the necklace!" Hero announced, and dashed off down one of the adjoining passageways.

"Not again," Swiftpaw griped, and Snowpaw cuffed her over the ears fondly before the two raced after him. Within moments, the cold stone was bare of any presence.

<———————>

The city buzzed with quiet noise, the eternal absence of silence. Somehow, this ambience proved to be soothingly tranquil, unbroken and unfaltering. Except, of course, for the distant sound of bickering forest cats, who had arrived at their destination in due time.

"Can we please just go in?"

"Shut *up* Jayflight!"

"Both of you pipe down a notch, we're trying to remain inconspicuous," Smokewhisker meowed in an undertone, and both Swiftpaw and Jayflight glared back at him. All six cats were crouched under a metal overhang, their whiskers twitching in anticipation. "Hero, how exactly do you know this is the place?"

Hero swallowed, though his tail twitched with excitement. "There are several groups of cats in the area around where Bling lives, but only three near where we found him wandering. He didn't remember the exact description of the necklace, and he didn't seem excessively concerned with finding it, which means he already knows where it is; and that's why he was staying so far away from his usual hunting grounds. Out of the three aforementioned groups of cats, only two of them are known for keeping hoards of currency, and only one is known for stealing it."

"Can we actually do something? The longer we sit here the more likely you are to talk," Swiftpaw muttered.

"Right," Hero replied, shaking his head as if to dismiss his thoughts. He hadn't gotten to do this in a while. The building that stood in front of them was constructed of wavy metal plates, with ramshackle wooden planks serving as a roof of sorts - a warehouse that had been abandoned for several years. Hero turned to the others, tail swishing in confidence. "I've got a plan."

This chapter's a bit shorter than I usually write them, but I liked the way it turned out. It did end up being a bit late, and as such I felt the need to stake my claim on this story part, so

here's a segment of my interim commentary.

[If somebody publishes this before I am done with it I will actually punch you in the throat]

~Frost

<------ Chapter Eleven ------>

Blaze here! I hope you enjoy.

"There it is." Hero murmured, scanning the building in front of him. It was a large, dilapidated building desperately clinging to life. It's walls were unstable and practically swayed with the wind. Entire chunks were missing from the roof of the structure. Weeds and wild plants had managed to grow in the huge cracks in the concrete near the building, and they seemed to be overtaking every entrance.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Jayflight questioned. Hero shrugged.

"I'm pretty sure it is. The trail led to this area, and that one cat was an awful liar so this must be the place." He explained. He padded around the corner of the building before pulling back sharply upon hearing a small movement at the mouth of the large entrance of the warehouse.

"Are they over there?" Lilypool whispered, stepping up beside him. Her sharp vision scanned where Hero had spotted the movement, and she ducked behind him after gathering information. With a flick of his tail, they wandered back a few buildings over where the rest of the group was waiting.

"I saw at least four cats there. Two brown tabbies, one gray she-cat, and a black and white tom." Lilypool informed them.

"So... how are we going to do this?" Snowpaw asked. "We could probably-"

"No. You and Swiftpaw are going to stay very far away from the action." Jayflight interrupted, "We have no intention of letting you get hurt."

"What?" Swiftpaw hissed dangerously. "We can probably help Hero more than you can!"

"Yeah, we're small and light on our feet. It could be an in-and-out thing, the rogues won't even know we were there." Snowpaw chimed in. Hero sighed as Jayflight stood her ground with a contrite look on her face. This was *not* going to go well.

"You are apprentices; barely trained young cats who should not even be here right now. You should feel happy that we didn't send a cat to walk you back to camp when we first saw you." Jayflight stood firm in her resolve, and Lilypool nodded in agreement behind her.

"We want you to be safe, and sending you in the middle of a group of rogues is not the best option for that." Smokewhisper spoke up, trying a different argument. Hero watched as Snowpaw literally stomped on Swiftpaw's foot to stop her from speaking.

"Hmph!" She muttered, walking off. The Warriors watched them settle in a corner not too far away before all turning to Hero.

"Well?" Lilypool snapped.

"I have a plan," Hero revealed. "All we have to do is *this*..."

--

Hero watched with bated breath as Lilypool and Smokewhisper wandered over towards the entrance of the warehouse. He ignored the twinge of unease that he felt, watching his ignorant Clanmates wandering into an unfamiliar area. They spoke softly, fur flat and tails relaxed as they pretended that they belonged in the area, but Hero's trained eyes could still catch the way that they limped ever so slightly from the pain in their soft pads from the hard concrete. But he had to work with what he had. Even if it wasn't much.

"Hey Smokewhisper, I haven't ever been *here* before." Lilypool mewed, walking into the warehouse. "I wonder what- oh, hello!" Hero cringed as she cheerfully greeted the rogues in front of her. Could she be any more obvious? Smokewhisper followed behind with a warning falling from his lips seconds too late.

"I'm sorry." Lilypool said. "Do you live in this, uh, building? It looks

very, uh, nice?" Hero rolled his eyes. She stepped further into the warehouse, peering around eagerly. Hero crept forward, Jayflight on his heels. They were on the opposite side of the entrance, waiting to creep in and search for the necklace. From where they were crouched, they could just make out the aforementioned tabbies that Lilypool described earlier. One battle-scarred she-cat stepped forward to intercept Lilypool.

"Who the hell are you?" She questioned.

The second the words left her mouth, Hero gestured to Jayflight. They stepped forward, Jayflight's steps as soft as they could ever be and Hero's pawsteps even quieter. They snuck forward, keeping to the shadows cast by the building itself.

"HEY!! We can see you two sneaking in the shadows. What do you think you're doing?" A different voice spoke. Hero watched as a different rogue, one they didn't even know was in the building, stepped forward with a sneer.

"Just following those stupid, er, housecats that have been messing with my yard all day! Thanks for stopping them for us." Hero babbled on the spot, mentally hitting himself for not scoping out the building thoroughly.

"I have never heard a housecat name like Smokewhisper. Your humans are so weird." The black and white tom commented.

"Shut up, Checkers. Your name isn't the best either!" A brown tabby responded.

"Well your name is Taz and at least that isn't some random human game! Besides, Smoke is a cool name. Well, nickname at least. And he looks kinda smokey, don't you think?" Checkers babbled.

"Silence!" The battle scarred gray she-cat yowled. Her tail flicked angrily and she stared at her partners in contempt. "You are all inept! I don't know why I stay with you, I really don't." She complained. She padded back and forth, ears flat. As she moved, Hero caught the glint of light shining off of something golden. Was that the necklace?

"I'll deal with you imbeciles later." She muttered. "You four are trespassing on our land! I don't care for what reason, and we'll let you go, but you have to pay us a fee." She demanded. "You housecats shouldn't have too much of an issue finding something shiny from your owners. I'll send an escort with you to make sure you deliver something in a timely fashion." The rogue decided.

"Who said this was *your* land? What if I don't care? I'm not giving you anything." Jayflight piped up from behind Hero. Hero let her talk, mind whirling. How were they going to get that necklace without getting into a fight?

As he thought that, a tiny form darted past him so quickly that it was a blur. They ran behind the gray she-cat, one stopping to snatch up the necklace. In that pause, Hero barely made out the familiar face of Swiftpaw.

"Don't you cats have anything better to do than sit around in a smelly Twoleg shack? Useless rogues." Swiftpaw spat, shoving Snowpaw into a run. They made it past the entrance of the den, the rest of the cats still frozen in surprise.

"Come ON!" She yelled, shoving the slower Snowpaw to move even faster. "LETS GO!"

Her words spurred every cat to action. The rogues jumped up with annoyed shouts as the four Warriors turned on the spot and ran as fast as possible out of the doorway. Hero spotted Snowpaw's tail as she turned the corner just a few fox lengths ahead of them.

The Warriors quickly caught up with the smaller cats using their long legs and greater strides.

"Where. Are. We. Going?" Snowpaw panted out. Hero shoved his way to the front of the pack, eyes scanning their surroundings.

"Follow me!" He took a sharp turn, startling the rest of the cats to follow.

He led them on a massive goose chase, dragging the Clan cats behind him and weaving his way through the alleys. Eventually

they passed through an alley system that he remembered, and Hero managed to lead the cats far enough away that the rogues gave up.

The group walked their way back towards Bling, panting and tired but feeling exhilarated and eager.

"Apprentices are useless, right?" Swiftpaw snarked, staring at Jayflight. The she-cat sighed, tail flicking with agitation.

"I'm not going to say sorry for trying to keep you two safe. What you did was very dangerous." Jayflight paused for a moment as Swiftpaw opened her mouth to retaliate, and enraged expression on her face. "But you did help and your efforts did get us out of there. So... we will include you two in future plans."

"Damn straight!" Swiftpaw crowed. She looked down at the necklace that draped across her bellyher chest. "Why does that Bling cat want this gaudy thing anyways? I'd have been glad to lose it."

"Well necklaces and other such trinkets can buy a lot," Hero said thoughtfully. "Having something to buy your way out of a scuffle is important. Why do you think those rogues stole it? It's pretty valuable."

"That's part of the reason I wanted it back," a cat said, stepping from the shadows. It was Bling, with ruffled fur matted to one side from sleep. It was clumped together comically.

"What's the other reason?" Snowpaw questioned.

"None of your business," Bling responded. Hero pulled the necklace off of Swiftpaw and held it out towards Bling. When the cat made to swipe it from him, he pulled it back out of reach.

"Tell us where Whiteshadow is first, and then we'll give you the necklace." Hero demanded.

"Last I heard, he was headed towards uptown kittypet residence," Bling revealed. "He wasn't set on a person or 'nuthin, but he looked determined about something. Now can I have my necklace?" Hero handed it over.

"Lets rest a bit before we move on." Hero suggested. Snowpaw collapsed in a corner with the other cats quickly following. Hero followed Bling off to the side, just out of earshot of the Clan cats.

"Where did you get that thing anyway? It is a bit too gaudy for your pay grade." Bling snorted.

"It's not actually mine," he said. Hero's eyes narrowed.

"Then why...?"

"I wanted to see if you still had your skills after being in the forest all this while. Apparently, you got it. You know, after you're done fooling around with these forest cats, you can always come back to work with me." Bling offered.

"No thanks. I told you I'm not into that anymore." Hero's ears flicked back as he thought of Bling's offer. He was not about to try and use wealth to stir up the factions. They were dangerous enough without antagonizing them.

"Hey, lets get to uptown." Hero said, turning his back on Bling. "It's not too far from here, so we might still have some daytime left to search out Whiteshadow." After a moment of thought, he turned back to Bling.

"You... stay safe." He mewed before gesturing towards the other cats to move forward.

"...Good luck." Hero heard Bling sigh. Hero watched as the other tom disappeared in the shadows, leaving no trace of his presence.

<------ Chapter Twelve ------>

As they walked further into the city, it became apparent that what they'd seen so far of the soaring grey buildings barely scratched the surface of the monstrous territory. As they continued on their journey, however, the cats were quickly distracted by the conversations they'd been holding since they left Bling's company.

"Damn straight?" Hero inquired, glancing over at Swiftpaw, who had been joking with Snowpaw about the look on the rogue cats' faces when they'd fled the warehouse. The small tortoiseshell simply flicked her tail carelessly, as if to dismiss the conversation entirely. "Where'd you hear that? Is there some sort of Clan slang I don't know about?"

"I heard you say it," Swiftpaw replied, yawning.

Hero snorted. "I've never said that."

"Yeah, you have," Swiftpaw challenged, rolling her eyes as Jayflight snickered from behind them. The apprentice trotted alongside him in an attempt to keep pace. "While you were talking to yourself."

"I don't talk to myself," Hero objected, and immediately received a few thinly veiled snorts of disagreement. "*What?*"

Smokewhisker exhaled, laughing under his breath. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but you do talk to yourself. Fairly often, actually."

"I don't-" Hero snapped, then cut himself off. "Alright, Swiftpaw, tell me exactly what I was saying when you heard that phrase."

"Oh, I dunno," Swiftpaw drawled, sharing an impish look with Snowpaw. "I think you were complimenting yourself."

Hero exhaled, aware of the burning sensation he felt in his ears.

"Well, uh..."

"What? Would you like me to elaborate?" Swiftpaw continued, putting a bit of a skip in her step and appearing to imitate Hero as she spoke her next words. "'Oh, Hero, you're so smart and talented. We totally respect your decisions and opinions-"

"Yes, yes, alright!" Hero muttered, and Swiftpaw flashed him a jovial grin before falling back a few paces behind him.

The cats continued to inform Hero of the entire discussions he held with himself at regular intervals, and Hero remained embarrassed about his apparent choice of topic, which for the most part was himself. However, they promptly fell silent as they reached what was commonly referred to as an uptown residential area.

The stone here was bright and gleaming, and the intricately constructed buildings were embellished with various decorative objects. The place seemed to have more character than a majority of the dismal grey buildings, and the mood was lifted instantly as they came upon the first house.

"What is this place?" Snowpaw asked, eyes wide with curiosity. This part of the city was somewhat elevated, and though it couldn't be seen this low to the ground, the view from here was breathtaking. Hero would have to remember to try and show it to his new companions.

"Well," Hero began, starting forward and gesturing for the other cats to follow, "This is one of the nicer areas in the East District. A lot of the kittypets here are wealthier, so they're often able to keep peace with Faction cats, and it's generally a fairly safe area, long as you stay within certain boundaries. There are even some kittypet Factions."

Swiftpaw scrunched up her nose with distaste. "There are *kittypets* here? And they actually have *power*?"

"It's not uncommon," Hero responded, then stopped short and frowned. "Hey, I was a kittypet!"

Swiftpaw only blinked in return. "What's your point?"

Hero sighed, shaking his head to dismiss her remark, while Snowpaw kneaded the stone with his paws in impatience. "So who do we need to talk to to find Whiteshadow?"

Hero guffawed. "This place is huge, Snowpaw, it might take a bit more than some wishful thinking to find the right cat to ask. It's not as if the first cat we come across will know about him."

"I'm sorry, did you say Whiteshadow?" All six cats whirled around to face to source of the voice, and Hero quickly identified a slender white she-cat with sparse brown patches. She blinked her startling blue eyes, scanning each of the somewhat rugged looking cats, though their appearances didn't seem to bother her. "Do you know where he is?"

"No, we don't," Lilypool responded, as Hero was busy trying to handle a very smug Snowpaw. "We were hoping you would, we've been trying to find him. What's your name? How did you meet Whiteshadow?"

The she-cat looked thoughtful for a moment, then sat down, daintily curling her tail around her paws. "My name's Duchess," She began, seeming very proud of her title, "And I didn't exactly meet this tom you're looking for, but my little brother did. He was passing through and asking for directions, and my poor little Mason must have been caught up in his tales of adventure, now they've both just vanished! I'm worried they've gone off on some dangerous, harrowing mission together, and little Masey just isn't ready to handle that. He could be lost in the city for all I know!"

Hero cleared his throat, stepping towards the distraught-looking kittypet. "That doesn't really seem like something Whiteshadow would do, miss," Hero began, and Duchess's eyes widened. "But... we'll do all we can to find him."

"Oh, thank you!" Duchess exclaimed, ignoring Hero's hesitance. Her eyes were suddenly drawn to the watch that hung around Hero's neck, and a wistful smile tugged at the corner of her muzzle. She brought a paw up to the collar that was fastened around her own

neck, a band set with colorful blue stones. "You're a kittypet too, then?"

"I was one," Hero corrected gently.

"Ah," Duchess murmured, "I apologize for not being much help. But if you can find my little brother and bring him back to me, I'm sure he can tell you more about this mysterious cat."

Hero smiled back at her, inclining his head politely. "Thank you, Duchess."

Duchess simply nodded, but before she turned to pad back to her kittypet residence, added, "I think I recall that they may have been heading in the direction of an area in the North District."

The group remained quiet until the graceful she-cat had leapt over a white picket fence, at which point Swiftpaw found it an opportune moment to make a negative comment. "Wow, that's helpful. I'm glad we're going to 'some area' where they '*may* have been going'."

"Hush, Swiftpaw," Smokewhisker murmured, "He's doing it again."

"Doing what?" Swiftpaw grumbled, and Smokewhisker gestured towards Hero, who appeared to be staring off into the distance. "Alright, who broke him?"

"North District," Hero meowed monotonously, flexing his claws against the cold stone. Swiftpaw had gone silent along with the other cats. "North District."

"We heard you the first time," Jayflight yawned.

Hero ignored her, turning to look at Snowpaw. "Okay, Snowpaw, you're going to be my confidant from now on," Hero informed the bob-tailed apprentice, who grinned proudly. "If a rogue cat wandered onto AshClan territory looking for someone, but that someone wasn't in AshClan, where would you direct them next?"

"BreezeClan, of course," Snowpaw replied curtly, as the other cats cast Hero a questioning glance.

"Exactly," Hero chirped, "And why would you do that?"

"Well, because their territory is close to ours," Snowpaw stated, but Hero gestured for him to continue. "And... because they're our allies?"

"So if you wandered into a section of the city populated by kittypets, they'd all direct you towards someone they trusted to help you - given their intentions were genuine," Hero reasoned, and the other cats seemed to catch on to his train of thought. "It just so happens that the kittypets in this area are allied with a Faction called Serendipity in the North District. If these cats were to send Whiteshadow anywhere, it would be there."

Hero's tail swished in excitement as they started off again. His mind was alive with thoughts, ideas, and deductions; he'd never felt better than he did at this very moment. He was on the hunt for information, and the constant problems he was now having to solve spurred him forward on his quest.

It soon came to Hero's attention that they had traversed a large portion of the East District in under a day, a feat which proved impressive given how unaccustomed these Clan cats were to the territory. The sky was still bright when Snowpaw cheerfully announced their arrival at the North District; easily recognizable by the considerable wealth of the area. The East District's upper residence paled in comparison to the grandeur of this place, and even the most ordinary-looking North District buildings were more ornate than the most exclusive East District homes. The cats here were accustomed to a relaxed, laid-back lifestyle with little confrontation, which somewhat explained why the North Faction was one of the smallest of the four main Faction groups.

"I can totally understand your father's detachment," Swiftpaw admitted, after having held a much less than friendly conversation with Jayflight for a duration of their walk, "If I had you as a kit, I wouldn't want you either."

Jayflight blinked at her incredulously. "Who *hurt* you?"

Snowpaw, who had been attempting to scout out the area ahead,

came to a halt a few paces in front of Hero and looked at the other cats over his shoulder. Swiftpaw and Jayflight were trailing behind, probably still arguing with each other, and Smokewhisker and Lilypool had been quietly admiring the view. "Hey, d'you think that's him?"

Hero stopped beside Snowpaw as they waited for the other cats to catch up, and Hero followed the apprentice's gaze towards a distant feline form sitting atop a tall white pillar. "We've barely been in the North District for ten minutes, it's extremely unlikely that the cat we're looking for is the first one we come across," Hero paused, recalling the earlier incident, before adding, "But if it was, that'd be about right."

"Let's go talk to him!" Snowpaw decided, trotting forward towards the distant figure, and now that they were getting closer, Hero saw that the cat certainly did resemble duchess to an extent.

"Snowpaw, he might feel a bit threatened by random cats running towards him," Lilypool commented, though Snowpaw obviously hadn't heard.

"I'll go get him," Swiftpaw offered placidly, and dashed off after the eager apprentice.

"And I'll go get *her*," Smokewhisker sighed, breaking into a run, though given his size it came across more as a loping gait. Hero looked as if he was going to start after them, then suddenly swiveled his ears in the direction of the shadowed alleyways behind them. His eyes flicked back and forth warily, as if something had set him off, but he couldn't identify what it was.

"Go ahead without me," Hero instructed, though the cats had already left and were out of earshot. "I'll be there in just a moment."

Lilypool realized Hero had stopped walking and approached him, exhaling loudly. "What are you thinking about now?" She asked, stepping into his one of view, though the tom stared right through her. "Hero? Something wrong?"

There was a moment of silence before Hero slowly shook his head.

"Nothing. No, there's... there's nothing wrong at all," He murmured quietly, then appeared to return to the present, looking back at Lilypool. "Sorry, we should get back to the others."

"Yeah," Lilypool agreed, her head tilted in concern, "We should."

Hero swallowed dryly and began to trudge towards the others, who we now conversing with a slightly overwhelmed brown and white tom who admittedly did bear striking resemblance to the cat they'd talked to in the East District.

"Hero! Hero!" Snowpaw yowled, beckoning the aloof tabby tom towards where the cats had been talking. "This is Mason!"

The worried-looking brown and white tom silently dipped his head in greeting, seating himself on the evenly-cut stone, and Hero had to take a moment to find the right words to address the tom. "You're Mason?"

The tom sighed. "My sister sent you, didn't she?" He asked, staring down at his paws in exasperation when Hero nodded. "You'll have to forgive her, she's tends to exaggerate things a bit."

"A *bit*?" Swiftpaw snorted, looking him up and down.

"Excuse us, sir," Snowpaw cut in, pushing past Swiftpaw and returning his greeting. "We've come here looking for a cat named Whiteshadow, and your sister said you might know something that could help us find him."

Mason smiled sadly down at him, glancing at Hero briefly as if asking permission to speak. Hero granted it with a somewhat awkward nod, still confused at Duchess's description, and Mason proceeded to tell his story. "I'm sorry, I want to do all I can to help your friend," He replied, receiving multiple looks of confusion, then exhaled before beginning his story. "Whiteshadow arrived here early this morning looking for someone, though even he didn't seem exactly clear on who he was trying to find. He'd already been told by some of the East District kittpets to head towards Serendipity, and I ran into him as he was on his way there. I informed him of the recent tensions among Factions, and how dangerous it could be

for someone who didn't know the territory to travel alone, but he seemed intent on getting to Serendipity as soon as possible.

I knew Duchess would begin to worry, bless her, so I offered to take him only as far as the Faction border. When we arrived, he seemed impatient, but he agreed to wait until I returned with some cats who could help him get the rest of the way."

The tom trailed off after that, looking dismal, and Hero's ear twitched in sympathy for the cat. "What happened next?" He asked gently, signaling for the other cats to move off a couple of feet.

"You have to understand, I didn't think..." Mason tried, then took a deep breath as he regained his train of thought. "I thought he needed help. I thought he was sick, chasing after some nonexistent cat who even he didn't know the identity of. So I went to find someone who could help him, and when I... when I got back, he was gone. I looked for him for hours, and I even headed off towards Serendipity to see if he'd gone ahead without me, but he hadn't."

The tom had begun to tremble, though Hero wasn't sure if it was from guilt, sympathy, or both. "Whiteshadow wasn't sick," Snowpaw whispered, his eyes wide and his tail drooping despondently. "He was looking for someone who could save us. He's *not* sick."

Lilypool quietly nudged Snowpaw away from the two toms, and Mason exhaled shakily. "I had never seen a cat so determined and distraught at the same time. He'd just *vanished*."

"You should get back home," Hero suggested uneasily, though it was apparent his mind was elsewhere. "We can escort-"

"I've done enough," Mason cut in, rising to his paws. "I'm capable of making it back home on my own. I wish you all the best of luck finding your friend, and if ever you need it, I will be there to assist you."

The cats parted to let Mason through, and the tom trudged off the dark stone path, now swathed in the dim grey light of dusk. Hero had wanted to show them the sunset. Silence buzzed in his ears, interrupted only by the ticking of the watch that laid cool against

his neck. "What do we do now?" Came Snowpaw's meek voice from within the small gathering, and Hero stared down at his defeated form.

"I..." Hero played back the scene over and over again in his mind, focusing on every detail as if he were searching for something. Some clue. There *had* to be a clue, there was always a clue somewhere. Hero's gaze swept over the cats; even Swiftpaw had gone silent in anticipation. There was supposed to be a clue, but there wasn't; there was only emptiness. The tom found himself left with a single, inescapable conclusion, and he shuddered even as the thought crossed his mind.

"I don't know."

Frost here with another chapter! This is getting a bit more serious, and you're welcome for that semi-cliffhanger there. Please tell me how you liked this chapter in the comments below, I look forward to seeing everyone's opinions and reviews!

~Frost

<------ Chapter Thirteen ------>

Hero awoke slowly, vaguely hearing the murmurs of the other cats. As he opened his eyes and yawned, he remembered his failure the day before. Whiteshadow was gone, with no trail to follow.

Hero stood and stretched, seeing some of the others talking in a circle a little farther down the alley in which they had all spent the night. He approached them slowly, defeat making his paw steps heavy.

"Hey, Hero," Jayflight said softly.

"Hey." Looking around, Hero realized that two of the cats were missing.

"Where are Lilypool and Smokewhisker?"

"Hunting. You slept for *ages*!" Swiftpaw informed him. "While you were busy being a useless lump of fur, *we* were trying to figure out where Whiteshadow could have gone."

Swiftpaw's comment hit home with Hero. He felt as if he had let them all down, and he still didn't have any sort of plan. Would he ever manage to rescue Whiteshadow, or had he finally encountered a task too great for him to complete?

"Swiftpaw, that's enough," Jayflight said sternly, which came as a surprise to many of the cats.

"Well, it's true, he-" Swiftpaw began, but Lilypool and Smokewhisker appeared with a couple of mice and a small bird, stopping the soon-to-be argument that was brewing between Jayflight and Swiftpaw.

"I see Hero's finally up," Smokewhisker teased. "Want to share a mouse?"

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry." How could Hero even dream of eating

when he had so miserably failed in leading these cats to find Whiteshadow?

"Hero, can we talk for a moment?" Lilypool asked, setting down her mouse and resting her tail on Hero's shoulder.

"Sure," Hero responded, offering her a somewhat fake smile and following her a short distance away from the other cats. "What is it?"

"What happened with you yesterday?" Lilypool asked.

"What do you mean?" Hero asked, confused.

"When you stayed behind while the others met Mason. You had a moment where you seemed preoccupied with something. You... spaced out."

"No, I didn't. I just thought I saw something," Hero denied self-consciously.

"Really?" Lilypool asked shrewdly. "Come on, Hero, you can trust us. You can trust *me*."

Hero sighed, letting his tail sink down. "It's just that... I don't want any of you to be in danger. You're all so unfamiliar with the city, the Factions, and I don't want you to get hurt. Especially not when there are seemingly invisible threats all around us and we're trying to complete an impossible quest!" he stopped for a moment, realizing how overwhelming the concept truly was, and raising his head to look at her. He sighed shakily. "I think you and the others need to go back to the Clan and leave this to me. It'll be a lot easier to look after myself in the city than to have to look after five cats who don't know the dangers." Hero paused, and Lilypool took the opportunity to speak.

"Maybe it *would* be easier if you went off on your own," Lilypool began, draping her tail across Hero's shoulders. "But we're not going to let you."

"Lilypool, I-"

"No, Hero," she stopped him. "We're *determined* to help you. See?" With a sweep of her tail, Lilypool gestured behind them.

Turning, Hero saw all four of the others approaching him, each of them carrying one or more valuable trinkets. Swiftpaw, he noticed, was struggling to carry what appeared to be a wristwatch much like his own. One by one, they stepped forward, laying the objects at his paws.

"What-" Hero began, but he was cut off by Snowpaw.

"We want to help find Whiteshadow. We brought you these so that we can have things to trade with, for information."

"Let us help you," Smokewhisker added.

"We spent all morning collecting these," Lilypool explained. "It really is lucky that you slept so long. Swiftpaw almost got stuck inside a Twoleg building so that she could get that wristwatch. Could you really have gathered all this on your own?"

"No. No, I couldn't have. Thank you guys." Hero looked at them all with a new-found confidence. "Let's go find Whiteshadow."

After leaving the alleyway, Hero stopped the other cats, each of whom were helping to carry the various trinkets. "Now, remember, don't interrupt me when I'm bargaining, and don't look as if anything I'm saying is a surprise. Trading in the city takes a certain experience and skill, which none of you have. Understood?"

After the cats had all murmured their agreement, they continued on their way, keeping a sharp look out for other cats. Suddenly, Swiftpaw darted ahead.

"Excuse me! Excuse me, Miss!" Swiftpaw called to a white kittypet sitting on a fencepost. A look of alarm spread across her face when she saw the group of cats coming, but a different expression soon replaced it when she saw the various trinkets the cats had.

"Why, hello, young one!" she greeted, her large belly jiggling as she hopped down from her fencepost and landed next to the cats. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" she asked, purring.

"We're looking for a cat named Whiteshadow," Hero answered, stepping in front of Swiftpaw.

"Hmm... I think I *might* recall having heard that name somewhere before," she answered with feigned thoughtfulness. "But it's just *so* hard to focus with all of these *lovely* valuables you have." She blinked up at Hero coyly.

Hero slid a silver bracelet towards her, but he didn't lift take his paw off of it. "Would this make it easier to remember?" he asked, going along with the she-cat's game; he knew how these sort of cats operated.

"Well, that certainly does help a *little* bit..." the kittypet hedged. "But I think that one of those gold pieces might *really* help my memory."

Jayflight rolled her eyes, but Hero calmly slid a gold charm towards her. "Is your memory clear now, ma'am?" he asked with a hint of sarcasm, making it clear that he wasn't going to give anymore.

"Well, I *suppose*," the she-cat replied, obviously disappointed. "Your cat, with the white pelt, he passed this way a few hours ago. Said he was looking for a cat named Fluffy. I told him that I didn't know any Fluffy, and he went on his way." The kittypet made to grab for the bracelet and charm, but Hero yanked them back.

"Just one more question, then you can have your pay," Hero told her, narrowing his eyes. He already had a suspicion that the she-cat was lying, but this would prove it. "Did he have any trinkets on him? I woke up a few nights ago to find my favorite blue crystal charm gone, and he's my main suspect." If this cat were being truthful, she would say that Whiteshadow didn't have anything valuable on him, and Hero would thank her then pass over the trinkets. But Hero didn't think that she was being truthful.

"I think I *do* recall seeing something blue around his neck," the kittypet answered. When she made to grab for the trinkets once more, Hero tossed them back to Snowpaw.

"Come on," he said, ignoring the furious she-cat, "I don't trade with liars."

The cats had several more encounters with cats of this kind, as well as some who were completely clueless. Hero snorted softly as he remembered the stupidest response, told by a kittypet who was still convinced that the cats were looking for white shadows. Finally, just when Hero was beginning to become discouraged, it seemed as if a cat had genuine information.

"Hey! You over there!" Jayflight called out to a black tom.

He turned casually, licking his paw. "What?" he asked bluntly.

"We're looking for a cat called Whiteshadow," Hero announced, stepping forwards. "If you happened to have any information of his whereabouts, we might just let a trinket or two slip in your direction." Hero hooked a ring on his claw, flicking it halfway between them.

"See, this Whiteshadow took my favorite blue crystal charm a few days ago, or so I suspect. What's one or two of these boring gold and gemstone pieces compared to my beautiful blue crystal? So I'm willing to part with that ring if you could help me find my cat."

The tom appeared to consider the offer. "I want *two* of those rings."

Hero narrowed his eyes. "Fine. You can take that ring in the middle now, and after I have my information, you can have the second." The black tom hesitated before padding forward and taking the first ring.

"Yeah, I talked to this Whiteshadow fella. He said he was headin' for West District, asked if I knew anythin' useful about it. I said I didn't, and he went his way. Didn't recall seein' no blue charm, though," the black tom replied with an accent.

"West District, again," Hero muttered, tossing the tom another gemstone-covered ring. When he didn't say anything else, Swiftpaw stepped forwards.

"Well, then, let's go."

Written by le Amazing Annco. I hope you liked it!

<------ Chapter Fourteen ------>

The buildings on this side of the city were taller, darker than the ones they had already passed. Hero couldn't help but notice the strange silence of the city. Usually the streets bustled with Twolegs moving back and forth going about their business. But today there was nothing, and the lack of movement left everything unsettling and quiet.

"Why don't you ever listen?!"

Well, except for the noise his companions were making.

"I don't have to listen to you. You aren't my mentor," Swiftpaw said flatly.

"A Warrior is supposed to be able to work in a group with their fellow Clanmates. Snowpaw does it! Everyone here does it! What's your problem?" Jayflight hissed.

Hero turned his head towards them, intent on interrupting the conversation, but as he did, he noticed a little flicker of movement in the corner of his eye. He turned around fully, but nothing was there. The air wasn't even disturbed.

Confused, the brown tom turned to face the front, only to startle at another movement seen out of the corner of his eye. He could feel the weight of a stare on his back, pressing into his pelt. He turned completely around, scanning the empty streets. Nothing. His body turned cold.

"Are you alright, Hero?" Lilypool asked. "You've turned your head repeatedly over the last hour to look over your shoulder at nothing."

He flicked his tail decisively. "I feel like something is following us." He kept his eyes moving, scanning constantly behind him.

There!

A white tail disappeared between two buildings. Motioning with his tail for the cats to be silent and follow him, he lead the way as they crept closer to the gap between the buildings. Hero thought he could make out a pelt within the shadows, possibly black or dark brown, then it was gone.

Hero stopped, squinting. How could a cat disappear like that? It was almost as if the cat was made of shadows. Suddenly, a large group of cats leapt out from behind the building. Hero only had time to notice that these cats were definitely tangible, unlike his elusive stalker seemed to be, before they were upon him and his friends.

A powerful white tom with black stripes crashed into Hero, knocking him over and clawing at his stomach. To Hero's relief, the cat didn't seem to be aiming for his throat. Hero kicked upwards, but the cat was too heavy to throw off. Hero raked his claws across his attacker's stomach, causing him to leap away to avoid Hero's claws.

Hero's stomach was covered with blood and it burned as he struggled back to his paws. He caught a glimpse of Lilypool trying desperately to defend against two cats at once before the black-and-white tom was upon him again, and Hero didn't have the strength to resist. He fell over, clawing vainly at his attacker as the cat stepped over him and towards Snowpaw and Swiftpaw.

The two apprentices fought back-to-back against the enemy cats. Right now they were easily beating a small, brown-and-white patched tom, obviously not much of a fighter. He clawed weakly at Snowpaw, but a particularly vicious swipe from Swiftpaw sent him running away from the battle.

"Take that, fox-heart!" Swiftpaw yelled at the retreating figure.

A sudden screech from Snowpaw made Swiftpaw turn to see him pinned down by a black she-cat who was taking the time to gloat, teasing him softly and lightly tracing a pattern in his chest fur with her claw. Swiftpaw launched herself onto the she-cat's back,

caterwauling a battle-cry as she raked her claws across the cat's shoulders.

The she-cat yowled, trying to buck Swiftpaw off, but all this achieved was allowing Snowpaw to roll out from under her paws and start battering her flank. She hissed and tried to bite at Snowpaw, but he danced out of the way, taking his claws down her leg. Swiftpaw leapt off of her back, landing next to Snowpaw as the she-cat went running, her fur torn and matted with blood.

A large, black-and-white cat stepped towards them over Hero's slowly-stirring body, and the two apprentices backed away from the brutal-looking figure.

"What do we have here?" he growled, showing the two young cats his fangs. "Do the little kits want to play a *game?*" he snarled threateningly.

"Over my dead body," Swiftpaw muttered, lashing out at him but missing.

"Let's see if we can arrange that, then," the cat replied tauntingly. "I'm called Skeleton for reasons other than my stripes," he informed them sinisterly, leaping at Swiftpaw.

Snowpaw intercepted him in mid-air, knocking the cat away from Swiftpaw. He landed on top of the tom and started clawing at his stomach, but the black-and-white cat easily threw him off.

Snowpaw rose to his paws, and he joined Swiftpaw in attacking the black-and-white tom, but they were no match for this cat, who was clearly a seasoned fighter. As Swiftpaw reared up boldly to attack, the tom attempted to claw at her stomach; he had barely gotten in a scratch when Snowpaw launched himself in front of her and bit down on the tom's paw, hard. He felt satisfaction as his teeth sunk past the fur and into flesh, and the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

The tom screeched and sank his teeth into Snowpaw's ear, twisting it. Snowpaw yowled as his skin slowly started ripping, tearing, before Swiftpaw clawed at the attacker's face and forced him to

release Snowpaw. The tom swiped at Swiftpaw in retaliation, causing a long gash to open up along her stomach. Before the tom could do any more damage, Hero barreled into him, knocking him away from the apprentices and giving them time to recover as Hero battered the tom's flank. They joined Hero's attack, taking the other flank, and together the three cats sent him running.

Hero left the apprentices to their own devices after helping them defeat the black-and-white tom and launched himself back into battle to help Lilypool, who was quickly losing against two opponents.

Hero knocked one away from her and swiped at his flank, drawing blood. The cat hissed and darted underneath Hero, throwing him sideways. Before the tom could do any real damage, Lilypool was at Hero's side, knocking the tom over and off of Hero and clawing at his stomach until he went off yowling.

Her previous attacker lunged at them, but they took turns swiping at him back-to-back until he finally admitted defeat, blood streaming down his face as he ran. Lilypool and Hero shared a smile before she rushed off the help Smokewhisker, who had a nasty scratch down his leg that was dripping blood. Hero followed, and the two cats supported Smokewhisker on either side, leading him into a small gap between two buildings.

"Stay here," Hero instructed him, and Smokewhisker nodded weakly. "Lilypool, make sure none of those cats get anywhere near him." After receiving Lilypool's nod of assent, he hurried back to the battlefield.

Jayflight was holding her own against two attackers, but Snowpaw and Swiftpaw were struggling; Hero watched as their attacker clawed at Swiftpaw's injured flank, causing the young cat to collapse.

Once again, Hero ended up helping the apprentices. Snowpaw was single-pawedly defending the injured Swiftpaw, but he was losing fast. Hero jumped onto the attacker's back, causing them to turn their attention away from the apprentices.

"Take Swiftpaw to Lilypool! Tell her that you can take her place as guard!" Hero yowled at Snowpaw, who nodded and started dragging Swiftpaw away.

Hero swiped at his opponent's face, and though the move caused him to be thrown off of the cat's back, blood was now dripping into their eyes, blinding them. Hero swayed suddenly as the world momentarily went black, and the cat took the opportunity to knock Hero over.

He could see Jayflight and Lilypool struggling to fight against three opponents, and Hero was quickly losing his own battle. He clawed at his attacker's underbelly, but his vision was fading in and out, making it hard to see anything definitively. His stomach was burning with pain, distracting him, and when he finally went limp under the cat's grasp, it was for real, not a feint.

The cat stepped away from him and joined battle against Lilypool and Jayflight, as the two she-cats lost ground quickly and were forced back towards Smokewhisker, Swiftpaw, and Snowpaw.

Hero struggled to stay conscious, but the periods during which his vision went black became longer, and he started to feel as if nothing were real. He fought against the urge to close his eyes, but the blackness was still winning.

As his eyes closed, he could have sworn that he saw and heard more cats come and join the battle.

This chapter was begun by Blaze, who was unable to complete it, and finished by Annco, who only realized whilst writing this that "viscous" is not how you spell the word "vicious" and that they actually mean two separate things...

~ Annco

<------ Chapter Fifteen ------>

Hero woke up gasping, flailing uselessly when he found his claws grasping at empty air. Sunspots danced across his vision as searing pain ripped through his chest, and with a pitiful squeak, he went completely limp, ears ringing from the sound of his own heartbeat.

"Oh!" someone exclaimed, though the voice sounded warped in Hero's dazed state. "Oh, he's gone and reopened his wounds."

"Where..." Hero trailed off as something was laid over his eyes, though he hardly objected, as the stinging sensation suddenly faded.

"Hush, don't move," the cat cooed, and Hero glimpsed a brown and white pelt through the whirling colors. "Estelle, come quickly!"

He wasn't in the street anymore. As he grew accustomed to consciousness again, Hero detected the gentle ambience of the place he was in, the distant warbling and trilling of city birds. No cars charging down jet-black asphalt, accompanied by constant blaring and wailing; no piercing orbs of white light suspended in the air by towering metal poles. He wasn't sure where he was, but as a soft breeze ruffled his fur, he somehow knew he was safe.

Hero couldn't tell when he blacked out again, but when he awoke, the pain coursing throughout his body had faded and the gentle breeze had died. For several long moments, Hero remained completely motionless, breath hitching every time he inhaled too deeply. Finally, he summoned the courage to open his eyes, and when he did so, the light didn't seem nearly so bright as it had before. He twitched the tip of his tail, and very, very slowly, he stretched out each of his limbs, cringing at the resulting twinges of numbness.

Determined to assess the situation, Hero pushed himself into a seated position, staring at the wooden planks beneath his paws. He swallowed, slowly raising his head to inspect whatever damage had

been dealt to him the previous day - judging by the strength of the light shining in on him from an unknown source, he'd been out at least that long.

He scanned his own form, noting the sticky substance that matted the fur in patches, though it seemed to be healing the wounds beneath, and the long strips of material wrapped around his chest and foreleg. He recognized these healing methods quickly, and though he'd become used to the Clans' herbs as of late, he quickly remembered the more modern city way of doing things. As he observed the room more closely, he realized he was inside a windowless cobblestone structure, save for the cracked ceiling above his head, where a gentle light illuminated the floating specks of dust that settled at his paws. He had been laying in a nest fashioned from different strips of material, much like the ones wrapped around his stomach, though there appeared to be a partially torn pillow at the bottom of the pile. Hero aimlessly batted at a few wayward feathers, though immediately regretted his decision when the sudden movement nearly made him fall over again.

Hero exhaled to stop his legs from wobbling, and with a confident swish of his tail and a quiet huff of determination, he steadily pushed himself into a standing position. He remained completely motionless for several long seconds before he was finally able to relax his muscles, and even longer to wait for the resulting bout of dizziness to fade. He smiled at his accomplishment, and raised his head proudly as he proceeded to take a step forward -

"You're awake!"

- and proceed to fall flat on his face.

"Ow..." Hero muttered, gradually picking himself up again as a small brown and white patched she-cat ran to his side.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" She apologized vehemently, pressing against Hero's shoulder to support him as he stood up again, and the tabby tom gratefully accepted her help. "I didn't mean to startle you, I'm just a bit flustered. You know what, you don't need to bother about me, let's get you back up on your feet."

Hero had a brief moment of confusion, as he was already standing, and was beginning to wonder whether he was hallucinating until he realized the she-cat meant the phrase in a figurative sense. Although, to be honest, there wasn't really much of a way to tell whether he wasn't still hallucinating.

"Here," the she-cat offered, setting down a water-filled bowl at Hero's paws and jolting him from his thoughts. He bent down to drink the water, and the she-cat abruptly dashed away again towards the entrance to the stone room, and returned only moments later with a small grey mouse dangling from her jaws. "I hope this is alright, I assumed you'd want actual prey, considering your Clan allegiance."

Hero smiled at her, accepting the mouse with a nod as she dropped it in front of him, finally giving him a moment to speak without rushing off. "Thank you," Hero replied, though he didn't have much of an appetite, deciding to change the topic of conversation in hopes that the she-cat wouldn't find him rude for not eating the mouse. "You appear to have done so much for me, and I don't think I've caught your name."

The she-cat cocked her head to the side endearingly, casting him a cheerful smile. "I'm Ray," she chirped, though before Hero could issue a compliment, she added, "it's short for Razorslash."

"It's what?"

Ray seemed to ignore his perplexed inquiry, and as soon as he had issued it, turned towards the room's entrance. Hero followed her gaze, where a long-legged lilac she-cat stood outlined in the light of the door. There was something about her - something he couldn't place. "Good morning, Hero."

"Who..." Hero murmured, squinting against the light as the she-cat stepped further into the room. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"Hero, this is Estelle," Ray introduced. "She's the one who saved you and your friends. Haven is generally a peaceful Faction, and without her input, you might not have been saved at all. She's the

one you should be thanking. And she knows your name because, well..."

"I'm your cousin," Estelle explained, signaling for Ray to leave them alone to converse with a subtle flick of her tail.

Ray obligingly followed the instruction, dismissing herself without another word, which seemed impressive considering her personality. "What do you mean? You can't be my cousin, up until this point I wasn't even aware I had any living family."

"I wasn't exactly expecting you to remember," Estelle admitted, sitting down in front of him with an audible sigh. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions, Hero, but this isn't exactly the greatest time. The Factions are on the brink of a war, South Faction is looking to claim more territory, and stepping in during that battle may have sparked conflict between the West District and Haven. I won't drag you into the Factions' politics; I've been talking with your friends, and it seems you're looking for a cat named Whiteshadow."

Hero stared at her wordlessly, becoming aware of the strange sensation clawing at his chest. Estelle noted his discomfort, and daintily curled her tail around her paws in preparation to speak. "Hero, there isn't much I can do to console you, and I can't apologize enough for never having made contact with you while you were in the city. Your mother wouldn't exactly be pleased with me if she were around now, and I know I haven't been the greatest cousin of all time, but I can only hope for your forgiveness."

Another few moments passed, and Estelle uneasily kneaded the ground with her paws, though her impatience melted away when she noticed Hero's sad smile. "You knew my mother?"

Estelle nodded, trying as hard as she possible could to convey friendliness. "I promise I'll tell you all about everything later, but at the moment, you have a friend to catch up with."

"I understand," Hero responded, and Estelle was surprised that his tone was more wistful than disappointed. Just the little bit of information she'd been able to give was enough.

Hero's heart brimmed with hope, and despite all of his best efforts, he couldn't seem to quell it. He matched Estelle's long-legged strides with ease as she led him out of the stone room and into the warmth of the afternoon sun. As he emerged from the darkness, Hero found himself walking through the remains of a dilapidated courtyard, paved with glossy white marble that felt cool agains the pads of his paws. The building he had exited appeared to be a small stone shed, and behind it an unkempt over of lush green grass stretched all the way to the adjoining wall, supported by elegant pillars and completely sectioning Haven off from the rest of the city.

At one end of the courtyard, massive double doors had seemingly crumbled because of the wall's compromised integrity from years of neglect, and a makeshift entrance had been fashioned for the coming and going of Haven cats. Dens had been created from rubble and different materials, formed against the landscape, and it wasn't easy to miss the constant bustling activity of the cats around him

At the other end, where Estelle had begun to lead him, half of the relatively circular courtyard gradually dipper deeper into the ground, and as they neared the formation Hero quickly recognized it to be an outdoor amphitheater.

"We put on plays sometimes," Estelle informed him in an effort to make conversation, though Hero could only continue staring at their surroundings in awe. "It keeps everyone entertained, and the amphitheater has certainly served the cause."

The amphitheater itself was human-made, though didn't have any seats; instead it consisted of four individual sections of large steps, divided by lower steps acting as corridors. The cats of Haven had obviously worked to maintain it, and every tail length some kind of cushion or bundle or material had been placed to seat a cat. They may not have been adapted to the wild way of life, but the cats of Haven sure knew how to live in style.

"Hero! Hero!"

Hero was nearly barreled over by an energetic Snowpaw, though Smokewhisker luckily caught up with him and stopped him in time.

"Snowpaw, give Hero a few minutes to recover."

Snowpaw huffed as he wriggled out of Smokewhisker's grasp, and Estelle giggled at the apprentice's antics whilst Hero continued past her to greet the rest of his team. "Swiftpaw said you were gonna die," Snowpaw babbled, skipping along beside him.

"How was I supposed to know he wouldn't?" Swiftpaw argued as Hero neared them, with Estelle and Smokewhisker in tow.

"You sound disappointed," Hero chuckled, and Swiftpaw stuck her tongue out at him.

"Hero, Hero look!" Snowpaw stepped in front of the tom to earn his attention, flicking his right ear and swishing his tail boastingly. The tom's right ear had been torn slightly near the base, and now had a somewhat notched appearance. "I got my first battle scar."

Swiftpaw snorted, marching up to Hero. "If you think his scar is impressive, look at this," Swiftpaw challenged, turning to that Hero could inspect her flank. Two long scratches were etched across the narrow part of her hind leg, and though he didn't want to diminish Snowpaw's spirit, Swiftpaw's scratches looked much more painful.

Hero shared a glance with Smokewhisker before looking past the two apprentices. "Okay, that makes three."

"Congratulations, you can count," Jayflight grumbled from where she'd been half asleep on a seat in the amphitheater, strands of white material wrapped around her neck.

"Four," Hero corrected, and Jayflight stretched lazily in response. "Where's Lilypool?"

"She's already waiting for you," Estelle replied, and Hero turned to look at her expectantly.

"Waiting for us? Where?"

Soft grass brushed against Hero's legs as the six cats ducked through

the courtyard's entrance, and Estelle led them forward into the overgrown remnants of what had previously been a park. A structure consisting of colorful bars and shapes even stood near the center, though it had begun to fall apart and rust with age.

As promised, Lilypool was waiting for them just outside the wall, staring off across the park towards a distant structure; angular and pale against the background of trees and distant buildings.

Hero approached her, along with the other cats. "We've finally made it," Lilypool whispered, turning to look at the other cats over her shoulder. Hero was hit by a pang of sympathy as he glimpsed her wounds; a set of claw marks extended from her cheek to the base of her shoulder. She didn't seem to mind her own injury, and Hero couldn't help but admire her excitement. "Whiteshadow's sitting right over there in that structure. *Right there*."

"We found him wandering around utterly lost in our territory, we asked him if he needed help, but he refused," Estelle announced to Hero. "Said he wasn't lost at all. I told him he could shelter for the night so long as he didn't cause trouble and earned Foxy's approval, so he ended up spending most of yesterday back at camp, and then about halfway through the night he woke up and went to sit over there. We didn't even realize he was connected to any of you until your bob-tailed friend over here began to tell me the story."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Snowpaw beamed up at her, tail lashing in anticipation. "Let's go get our friend back!"

Without waiting for an answer, Snowpaw whirled around and bounded off through the long grass. "Snowpaw!" Swiftpaw groaned, though light danced in her eyes as she chased after him.

"I'll get them," Smokewhisker begrudgingly volunteered, but every cat within Hero's group seemed to have been taken over by the excitement, and Lilypool laughed liltingly as she joined Smokewhisker in catching up with the apprentices. Hero and Jayflight followed at a slow trot due to their more severe wounds, and Estelle padded behind them, blinking patiently.

"Slow down, you two!" Smokewhisker commanded, having caught

up with the two apprentices and was attempting to keep them from running off. Snowpaw giggled, trying to push past Smokewhisker's paws while Swiftpaw had stopped a short ways behind to complain. Smokewhisker smiled down at Snowpaw as he finally gave up his escape attempt, staring up at the tom as the other cats began to catch up. "Let's not overwhelm Whiteshadow."

As if on queue, a breeze blew past the assembled cats, and they all simultaneously directed to their attention to the structure that they had neared. The swaying branches of a willow tree blew to the side, and past them all seven cats glimpsed Whiteshadow's black and white pelt through the leaves.

"I'll talk to him," Hero decided, and not even Jayflight objected when he look at each cat for their approval. Estelle gave him an encouraging nod, and Hero inhaled sharply as he started towards the structure, accompanied only by the quiet rustling of the leaves over his head. He pushed past the low hanging willow branches, which had now returned to their original position, all but hiding the remaining cats from view. He took a deep, shuddering breath before he began to climb the steps leading up the podium, and as he reached the top, his heart began to race. Whiteshadow sat on a granite bench, facing away from him and staring out across the garden. "Whi-"

"I can't come back."

Hero fell silent, stopping dead in his tracks. Whiteshadow twitched his tail, and slowly, he pushed himself to his paws and turned to face Hero. The tom's stomach heaved with each labored breath, each of his ribs silhouetted on his chest. His eyes were glazed over from exhaustion, and Hero was abruptly struck by a feeling he hadn't experienced for a long time. Without warning or cause, Hero felt hollow.

"What do you mean, *you can't come back*?" Hero echoed the tom's words while he struggled to find his own, and Whiteshadow continued to stare right through him.

"I..." Whiteshadow began, and his voice seemed to tremble, "I haven't found what I came here to find. I can't come back until I

do."

At the very last word, Whiteshadow's voice cracked, and he seemed to crumble under the weight of his own words. Hero was motionless for a few more moments, then his ears flicked backwards and his eyes narrowed.

"You can't come back to the Clans," Hero growled, "because you still haven't found your mysterious prophecy cat."

"Hero-"

"Whiteshadow, you're not some self-appointed savior of the Clans!" Hero snapped, and the black and white tom winced at the tone of his words. "Did you *never* think about the consequences of your actions? We've been out here for days trying to find you. Snowpaw nearly got hit by a train, we've been ambushed by Faction cats and travelled for hours on end to get you back to the Clans, and when we finally manage to intercept you during your crazy quest to fulfill a prophecy given to you by some dead cat, you tell me that the only thing I have to save you from is yourself."

"I don't need to be *saved*," Whiteshadow retorted, visibly shaken as he nearly choked on his own words, "I need to save *them*. I've always put myself on the line, I've always had to be perfect, and I always will if that's what it takes. Please, Hero, I have to do this."

Hero only soothingly flexed his claws in return, and the wood splintered as it was pierced. "You're not StarClan's errand cat," he hissed. "You don't have to do everything that everyone else wants."

Whiteshadow blinked back at him sorrowfully, his ears hugging against his skull. "Maybe I do," he whispered in an undertone, and while Hero stared at him, expression a mixture of anger and confusion, he straightened his posture to look at the tom more directly.

"But it's taking so *long*," Snowpaw complained for the thirtieth time, having flopped down between Smokewhisker's giant grey paws as

he waited for Hero to return. Estelle had long since left the group to attend to her caretaker duties. "I want to see Whiteshadow."

"Maybe he and Hero are having a heartfelt reunion," Swiftpaw purred mockingly, batting her eyelashes while Jayflight glared at her.

"Maybe he just doesn't want to see you," Jayflight pointed out.

Swiftpaw opened her mouth to argue when Lilypool interrupted her. "All of you, hush, he's coming back," She notified them, and the remaining cats turned their attention to the pale brown tabby tom pushing his way through the willow branches. "Hero?"

"He's not coming," Hero muttered despondently, padding past the group of cats without another word.

Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, tell me how you liked it in the comments! We apologize for the recent update gap and are working to get things back on track.

~Frost

<------ Chapter Sixteen ------>

"What do we do now?"

The first time the question was asked, Hero had elected to ignore it, and though few words were exchanged as the group of cats started away from Haven after a brief farewell to Estelle and Ray, the inquiry continued to plague the minds of the cats who followed in Hero's paw steps.

"Hero," Lilypool began gently, matching his crestfallen pace to walk next to him, "we need to talk about what to do next-"

"I've already made that decision," Hero interrupted, without turning to look at her. "I'm taking you all back to the Clans."

"Taking *us* back to the Clans," Lilypool repeated, the corner of her mouth twitching into a frown as she seemed to pick up on his meaning, "You're not going to come back."

Hero exhaled; he should have expected Lilypool to pick up on his decision. "I can't live like that," He began to explain, and though he suspected she already understood his point, he continued to clarify, "It was fine for a month, being in the Clans, and I thought tedious Warrior duties would be enough to keep me busy. Turns out it wasn't. Ever since I woke up with these abilities, I can't stop recklessly investigating every mystery I come across. I can't stop thinking any more than I can stop breathing."

Lilypool nodded in understanding, and Hero watched her gaze drift to the ever-ticking watch fastened over the slightly matted fur on his neck. "Ironic, isn't it? Wearing something to remind you that time is constantly moving, and that you've got to move with it," she murmured, and Hero smiled in amusement at her remark. "So you're going to stay here, in the city. You're going to accept Bling's offer."

Hero decided not to interrogate her on how she knew about him

and Bling's previous allegiance, and instead continued to issue a reply. "I don't know yet," he admitted, "but I failed the one mission Thistlestar gave me, and I know I can never be happy in the Clans, so I don't see much of a point."

Lilypool smiled faintly, though it appeared to be out of empathy rather than sympathy. "Hero, there's something I want to-"

"Hero! Lilypool!" Snowpaw suddenly cried, and Hero whirled around towards the sound of the apprentice's voice.

Without their noticing, several cats had materialized from seemingly nowhere behind the group, and it took approximately two seconds for Hero to recognize Tags near the head of the group. Without missing a beat, Tags had stepped between Snowpaw and the group of cats, laying her unsheathed claws against Snowpaw's throat. The apprentice trembled, and he struggled to keep his composure, as the overwhelmingly pungent scent of East District cats overpowered Hero's senses.

"Let him go before I tear out your throat!" Swiftpaw threatened, shaking with anger as the hair along her back began to bristle.

"Not before I rough him up a bit," Tags snarled menacingly, though Swiftpaw didn't so much as flinch at her venomous tone.

Smokewhisker attempted to step towards the spotted she-cat, but Thug immediately stepped in front of him, growling a warning.

"You're not talkin' your way out of this one, Timekeeper," jeered the fluffy white tom who'd padded past Hero's flank, though he didn't make a move for fear of endangering Snowpaw.

Tags, Thug, Zero, Bravo, and at least four other cats milling about in the shadows. Hero's team was outnumbered, injured, and exhausted. They couldn't fight back without getting themselves killed. "What do you want?" Hero hissed, instinctively stepping in front of Swiftpaw and the rest of the group.

"Honestly?" Tags laughed, locking Hero in her gaze, "I want you dead. But our Sunshine's got other plans."

"Which we aren't privy to," Bravo added, and Zero cuffed him over the head with one of his paws.

"We're not going anywhere with you mouse-brains," Swiftpaw spat, lashing her tail.

"Swiftpaw," Lilypool murmured sternly. She knew Hero already had a decision in mind.

Hero stared cooly at Tags while Snowpaw fell silent, and Swiftpaw continued to watch him, unwilling to break her gaze.

"Take us to your leader."

<———————>

The East Faction's camp was, to put it simply, vastly intimidating. The brick walls and arches were lined with patrolling cats, and the buildings cast long shadows across the street they walked down. Haven's courtyard and amphitheater paled in comparison to the enormity of this place, and Hero found it no less impressive than he'd always imagined. It was obvious from the sheer number of cats entering and exiting the camp that there could be any number of patrols and teams heading out at one time; Hero had always been curious as to the ranking system of Factions, though on all of his expeditions he'd never encountered anything quite like this.

"This place is *huge*," Snowpaw commented, nearly tripping over Swiftpaw for the third time since they'd left the comfort of the alleyway. Since Tags had threatened to take a bite out of him, Snowpaw had become oddly reliant on Swiftpaw's protection, and was now walking mere inches away from a cat half his size while simultaneously trying not to trip over her. Snowpaw had grown quite a bit during the days they'd been away from camp, and it quickly came to Hero's attention that despite Snowpaw's lighthearted nature, the tom was more than old enough to become a fully-fledged Warrior.

"Where exactly are we meeting Sunshine?" Hero asked Thug, who padded a few steps ahead of him.

"Just over there," Thug replied simply, nodding towards the gaping stone archway that marked the entrance to a large building with at least four stories, as far as Hero could tell. A large window depicting some sort of human scene cast colorful shadows onto the ground before him, and as he surveyed the area, Hero realized that many similar colorful additions had been made to the dim scenery. "This place used to be some historical building of some kind, it was condemned a while back by humans and the East Faction settled in soon after."

Jayflight stared at each dappled patch of colored light, seeming intrigued by the swirling patterns, and every time they passed one Zero would have to have to nudge her forward along with the rest of the group, much to her distaste. All of the cats were uneasy; not even the East Faction patrol knew exactly what was going to happen during this meeting, so the rest of the walk up to the building was relatively silent.

"Thug," greeted the large golden-spotted tom posted outside of the entrance to the building, along with a smaller but equally intimidating brown bengal she-cat.

"Teeth, Beak," Thug dipped his head respectfully to the two guards, "how are the kits?"

Beak, the she-cat, seemed to laugh under her breath. "They're a pawful, and Teeth is obviously no use," she teased, and the tom smiled back fondly, "he's too soft on them both. Bones convinced Chase to come on some exploration mission with him while we were on watch this morning, she got stuck in a barrel for two hours and Bones got lost and took half that time just to find his way back."

Hero's team shared glances. It was an odd feeling, knowing that cats you'd always considered your enemies had their own lives and trials and emotions.

"It's a shame you're not here more often, you're much better at

watching your siblings than Shada is," Teeth began, and Hero realized that he was speaking directly to Tags, who had now ducked her head seemingly in embarrassment.

"We can talk about this later," Tags muttered, pointedly trying to end the conversation. "Can we go past now?"

Tags had a family. Two mischievous siblings and two dutiful parents. Hero had never seen her as anything more than his rival, and as they entered they building with Beak and Teeth's go-ahead, he begun to recognize the circumstances of all of his confrontations with the East District. He had never had to do anything for anyone else until he joined the Clans, and now that he had, he seemed to understand Tag's allegiance to her Faction.

Thug led the group into the shadows of the building, lit only by the tinted light cast across the stone beneath their paws. They soon reached a spiraling staircase, and the further they ascended, the more beautiful the place became. The courtyard could be glimpsed from the windows at certain intervals, and even Swiftpaw smiled in spite of herself at the breathtaking view.

The city lay sprawled before them, every detail etched against the horizon as far as the eye could see. As they reached the final floor of the building, Hero could hardly keep himself from imagining the view at dusk - the ashen fringes of night beginning to grip the scenery, laced with starlight and the reflection of the moon painting the cobblestone walls with watery silver light. He was so caught up in the landscape's beauty that he nearly didn't notice the jet-black tom seated on a stone podium, the shadows warping around his form with every breeze that drifted in from the open window to ruffle his fur. The tom's piercing yellow eyes rested on each of the cats in turn, and with unsettling elegance for a cat his size, Sunshine approached the group.

"I had to hold an audience with you and your company, I apologize for the methods utilized to do so," Sunshine addressed Hero and the cats who stood warily behind him, and with little more than a twitch of his whiskers, Sunshine dismissed his own cats, save for Thug, who seated himself at the base of the podium.

"If you're not trying to kill us, what is this about?" Smokewhisker asked calmly, when Hero seemed to hesitate in his response. He'd only met Sunshine once before, when he was much younger and had been attempting to steal a bracelet from his personal collection - he hadn't much wanted to talk then, and he found himself in the same position now.

Sunshine exhaled, draping his tail over the edge of the platform. "I have brought you all here to ask a favor of you and your Clan."

There was a long silence.

"You *what*?" Swiftpaw snorted in disbelief, and Snowpaw slowly pressed one of his paws to her face in an attempt to stop her from offending the cat who held their fate in his paws. She swatted it away after a few awkward moments of accusatory glaring.

"Tensions have been rising here in the city, and I have held off these hostilities from opposing Factions, but I cannot continue doing so for an interminable amount of time. The South Faction has expressed their opposition to domestic bloodlines, and the North Faction and Enclave have claimed their same beliefs, allying with them purely for their convictions and the territory than can be declared for their own Faction," Sunshine began to explain, though as he curled his tail around his paws, Hero knew he was far from done. "We disagree with their proclamations, and have found our own allayment with the West Faction, who are fighting in part to protect the cats of Haven and the other Minor Factions that have been established here in the city. But even with their help, they outnumber us two cats to every one of ours."

Hero cleared his throat as he noticed the expressions of the cats around him. "To put it simply, the South Faction thinks kittypets and loners should not be allowed into Factions, and are threatening to overtake the city along with the help of two other Factions to enforce their beliefs. Sunshine wants us to help prevent this from happening."

"Alright, big shot," Swiftpaw scoffed, though Sunshine didn't appear to have any particular reaction to her tone, to Snowpaw's relief, "Not to offend your great majesty or whatever, but the way you're

putting this doesn't make it sound like it's our problem - or any of our business, for that matter."

"You haven't allowed me the chance to explicate," Sunshine continued, and Jayflight groaned impatiently before being silenced by Lilypool's shove. "Many years ago, when your Clans settled the plains outside of our territory, there was a conflict between the Clans and the original cats of our Faction. Blood was shed, and our dispute was eventually solved by the creation of a peace treaty. The plains were bestowed unto the four original Clan leaders, and the East Faction returned to the city, where the treaty served its purpose and confrontation was avoided for many years after."

However, a cat by the name of Ash, who had been the one to convince her companions of our Faction's proposal, wanted to thank us further for the service we had done them. Despite the warnings of her brethren, Ash met with one of our own cats in their new territory to discuss an act of gratitude. It was decided that a call-to-arms agreement was in order; if ever the cats of the East District found themselves faces a seemingly unbeatable enemy, the cats of the Clans would come to their aid.

Unfortunately, the cat who made this agreement met with an abrupt and untimely death, with no living heirs to carry on this message to future generations, and so this agreement went unfulfilled. Until the present day, there was little to no mention of such a consensus, until I was finally able to obtain the information regarding it."

The cats waited with bated breath as Sunshine turned, removing a weathered and yellowing piece of paper from where it had been laid in the depths of the shadows. He stepped towards the cats and set it gently at Hero's paws. In faded ink, two paw prints had been pressed onto the surface - one large, and belonging to a city cat, judging by the condition of the pads of their paws, and the second much smaller. As he looked more closely at the smudged edge of the print, it became apparent that this cat had an extra toe, making six in total.

"Six toes on the left paw," Smokewhisker noted aloud, having become an expert on AshClan lore due to the frequent leadership

positions of his ancestors, "It fits with her description, and the document is obviously ancient. This could very well be Ash's signature."

"What do you say, Timekeeper?" Sunshine inquired, after Hero had finished his inspection of the paper. "You hold our lives in your decision."

Hero turned back to the cats, who stared at him expectantly. "I realize that you may not feel obligated to, but-"

"Hero," Lilypool laughed, cutting short the speech the tom had been prepared to give, "We're all with you on this. If you want to save the city, then there's no way we're letting you do it on your own."

Each cat nodded in agreement with her statement, and Hero was suddenly flooded by the warmth of their approval. He looked back at Hero, and the tom dipped his head towards the tabby tom. "Thug and Tags will escort you to the edge of your territory, I trust you can make your way back to the plains from there."

The walk down the staircase was a blur of color, and for the duration of it Hero was completely lost in his own thoughts. The Factions were on the brink of his war, the fate of the city was on his shoulders - in his anticipation, it was easy to forget the trials and hardships he had experienced over the past few days. Tags and Thug fell in beside the group as they reached the courtyard, and while Tags remained fairly silent, Thug took every possible moment to express his newfound gratitude to the Clan cats.

"I was born a kittypet," Thug had admitted during one of his ramblings, having caught them all off-guard with his sudden talkativeness. "The East Faction took me in when I was barely three moons old. I've spent my entire life trying to repay that favor."

As they passed underneath the shadow of the great stone arch, with Jayflight still marveling at the architecture, they were unexpectedly joined by a third East District cat - a small calico she-cat who seemed to have had a bit of difficulty catching up with the group.

"Wait!" She exclaimed, rushing up to Hero with her fur fluffed up in

excitement, "Wait, I'm coming with you."

"Roach," Thug murmured, and judging by his timbre he knew the small cat well, "What are you doing? Shouldn't you be with your brother?"

Roach shyly flicked her ears, but seemed to gather up enough courage to reply. "Zero belongs to this life - and I appreciate everything he tries to do for me - but I don't," She looked from Hero to Thug, eyes pleading. "Please, you can't tell him, he'll try to come with me. He needs to be here - he *should* be here."

Hero shared a glance with Thug, who sighed quietly and nodded. "Roach, you understand that finding you a new Faction could be difficult," Hero tried, though the she-cat seemed to already have made up her mind. "You can't be accepted to Haven because of my Faction ties, and Enclave would kill me if they had the chance. We could bring you to Serendipity, but-"

"But you have more pressing matters," Roach acknowledged, "I don't want to be a burden."

"We can take you back to AshClan," Snowpaw suggested, looking back Lilypool, who he had deemed to have the most influence over Hero.

"That's not a bad idea," Lilypool confirmed. "Thistlestar has taken in non-Clan cats before."

"Fair enough," Hero agreed, then turning to the rest of the group, "We don't have much time to waste. It's time to return to the Clans."

Two updates in a row. As usual, I hope everyone enjoyed, please tell me how you like it in the comments!

I kind of ship Snowpaw and Swiftpaw too much. Somebody stop me.

~Frost

Edited by Annco

<------Chapter Seventeen------>

"We will leave you here," Thugs said as the group of cats reached the edge of the plains. Hero couldn't believe how far they had come, or that they were returning home without Whiteshadow. He shook that thought away. They weren't abandoning Whiteshadow permanently, they were just pausing in their search to assist the East Faction cats.

"Thank you," Hero dipped his head to the two cats.

"It is we who should be thanking you," Tags said. "Please come as soon as you can."

"We will," Hero promised.

"Tell my brother that I love him, and that I'm sorry, but Faction life isn't for me," Roach said.

"Of course. We must return to the city now."

Hero dipped his head once more, and the two cats padded back towards the city. As the Clan cats turned to start their journey home, they couldn't help but pause.

"It feels so weird... Being so close to home," Snowpaw admitted.

"Well, I think it's *great!*" Swiftpaw exclaimed, bouncing ahead of the others. "Come on!"

As they padded across the territory, AshClan camp grew bigger and bigger on the horizon. All of the cats were moving quickly now, even Roach; their home was so close! They approached the camp, and as one, the cats stopped near the entrance. For a moment, no one said anything.

"So... I guess we go in?" Lilypool asked nervously.

"Right," Jayflight replied. But still, no cat moved. Finally, Hero took

the lead and padded through the entrance, the others following him.

As they entered the camp, there was at first total silence; all of the cats were simply staring at the group in shock. All at once, they pressed forwards, asking questions and giving greetings.

"Where have you been?"

"Why did it take so long?"

"Where's Whiteshadow?"

"Who's the new cat?"

"How did you get injured?"

There wasn't time to answer any questions or focus on any one cat before Thistlestar's commanding new rang across the clearing.

"Hero, come to my den so that we can discuss your mission." Thistlestar's gaze was as cold as ice as it settled on Hero, and he knew why. He wound through the cats, finally making his way to Thistlestar's den.

"Where is my son?" Thistlestar wasted no time on cutting to the point.

"Well... We found him. But he refused to come back with us until he found his mystery cat."

Thistlestar seemed to swell to twice her size. "You think that's an excuse? Why didn't you stay and help him? Why didn't you drag him back?"

"We were going to," Hero could hear defensiveness creeping into his mew. "I was going to send the others back here to heal and rest, but we got captured by a group of East District cats. They took us to their leader, who wanted to request... Our help."

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After Hero had finished explaining the promise AshClan's original leader had made, he sat waiting for Thistlestar's response.

"You dare think that after these cats kept Whiteshadow from coming home, I would *help* them?"

"What? The Factions didn't cause Whiteshadow to do anything—"

"The Factions are the only reason that Whiteshadow hasn't returned! *They* are the foxhearts who have taken my son from me! How *dare* they request our help? How dare they!"

Before Hero could stop her, Thistlestar rushed out of her den.

"All cats old enough, gather!" Thistlestar yowled. Hero blinked in surprise. That wasn't how it went, was it? "Now!" she yowled again.

Hero padded out of the den to see Thistlestar perched on one of the branches of the Great Oak.

"These Faction cats have stolen Whiteshadow from us! We must take the initiative and attack!"

Lilypool stepped forwards. "*What?*"

"Are you out of your mind?" Swiftpaw hissed. "Hero, what did you *tell* her in there?"

"What are Factions? Are they like Clans?" asked Alderflower, but no cat paid attention to her.

"What exactly happened there?" Russetfire, the deputy, questioned Thistlestar directly.

"They have taken him captive and plan to do the same to the rest of us!" Thistlestar revealed.

"They didn't kidnap him, he just decided to stay there!" Hero butted in. The cats below grumbled in confusion.

"Why would he want to stay there if he could come home to be with us?" Thistlestar argued. "No, they must have done something to him

to force him. Besides, you told me the Factions are at war. If we attack while they are distracted, we can get the upper hand and get Whiteshadow back!"

"He just is upset because he hasn't finished his mission, he has nothing to do with the war they are having," Hero reasoned. He felt helpless, watching the Clan become divided from only a few, confusing words. He stared at the cats around him, trying to somehow use his ability to divine into their minds to see what they were thinking even though he knew that wasn't how his powers worked.

Yet as he stared, he noticed Harestripe, the medicine cat, looking at Thistlestar shiftily.

"Do you have anything to say?" Hero prodded the brown tom cat. Harestripe shuffled his white paws.

"He will never finish his mission," Harestripe said.

"How do you know that?" Hero asked. When it looked like the brown tom was going to clam up, Hero stomped his foot directly in front of the tom. "What do you know about this?"

Harestripe's eyes became large as he stared at Hero. His eyes moved between Thistlestar and Hero, and Hero watched as something in them changed.

"It was a fake prophecy."

Gasps filled the clearing quickly followed by murmurs of confusion. Hero kept Harestripe's attention away from them and focused only on him.

"If it was fake then why did you let him follow it. How did you even realize that it was fake?"

"I never wanted to be a medicine cat!" Harestripe suddenly bit out. "I never wanted this position, never wanted to be chosen for this. I don't know why StarClan decided to make me a medicine cat. But I never wanted this and you know that."

Hero waited.

"I was visited one night by the Dark Forest. I didn't realize it at first, but the cat, he... he played with me and my emotions until my heart was filled with greed and ambition. I... we, we wanted Whiteshadow out of the picture. We knew that he was a very good candidate to become the next leader. He needed to go so that the Dark Forest cat's heir could become leader instead."

Thistlestar's tail lashed violently, swinging back and forth in an almost hypnotizing fashion.

"He wanted Foxspring to become leader after you," Harestripe finally revealed. One by one every eye landed on Foxspring.

"I had no knowledge of this," the ginger tom swore. Hero could see the surprise etched in his normally grumpy face. There was something else there as well, a heavier, thicker emotion that lingered in his eyes. Anger? Guilt? Frustration? Perhaps a mixture of the three.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me, Thistlestar," Harestripe begged his leader. The black and white she-cat surveyed him with cool green eyes.

"This is not something that can be easily forgiven. You have betrayed the Clan, and would have sold us all for power. You are hereby banished from this Clan. I expect you to be off of the territory by sundown. You know what we will do to you if we find you here again."

Hero blinked, almost surprised. She was a fierce she-cat, and though she let her emotions rule her, Thistlestar did also know what punishments to give and when they were acceptable. Hero could think of many rulers who would have immediately turned to murder, but here a cat who had committed a grievous offense was simply exiled.

He watched as Harestripe sagged before nodding and turning. The cat was gone in seconds, followed discretely by two Warriors of the Clan. The camp was filled with the murmurs of cats gossiping,

trying to figure out exactly what had happened and what was still happening.

Hero turned to Thistlestar.

"If that prophecy was fake, then I need to get to Whiteshadow immediately. He is going to get hurt looking for a cat that is not actually there." Thistlestar opened her mouth to speak but Hero wasn't going to mince his words now. "I am going after him wether you want me to or not. I only ask you not to declare war on the Factions, as clearly none of this is their fault."

The she-cat flicked her ears, observing Hero. His pelt was heaving, his resolve showing with his enthusiasm. Her green eyes flashed with amusement.

"I was only going to suggest a week of rest for you and your companions. You have come a long way. Besides, I have decided that I am coming with you. I'd like to speak with these Faction cats myself."

Annco wrote the beginning of this chapter, and Blaze finished it. Teamwork!

<------ Chapter Eighteen ------>

Hero paced outside of the Warriors den, itching in anticipation. After Thistlestar's decree, Hero and his company had agreed to stay in AshClan another week while their wounds healed. During that time, Harestripe's apprentice Fawnpaw had taken a trip to the Spirit Tunnels - winding corridors carved into the face of cliffs where medicine cats were rumored to converse with their ancestors - and had returned a fully fledged medicine cat.

It was the newly named Fawnsoul who watched him pace now, her expression set with unfaltering tolerance as her eyes traced his restless movements. The she-cat had grown in more ways than one, and though she remained small in stature, her healing skill had only increased, and she had become a well-regarded confidant in Whiteshadow's absence.

"Where are they?" Hero asked impatiently, and though the question was directed mostly to himself, Fawnsoul answered obligingly.

"They'll be here," she assured him, though the confidence in her voice did seemingly nothing to ease his tension. "You're their friend, they aren't going to let you go alone."

Hero exhaled, but smiled faintly in her direction. Fawnsoul accepted this gesture of thanks with a gentle nod, then her ears pricked as the approaching group of cats stole her attention. Hero recognized their voices even before he saw them, though not exactly as he'd expected; these cats had changed since their journey. Jayflight and Swiftpaw didn't argue quite as often - there wasn't much time for it, now that the apprentice spent most of her time off on adventures with Snowpaw. Smokewhisker and Jayflight seemed more friendly towards each other as well, and as he distinguished Lilypool's careful and deliberate pace, he flicked his ears in greeting.

Fawnsoul had disappeared into her den in order to let the cats converse in private, and Hero bubbled with excitement at the prospect of a new quest. "Is everyone ready?"

"No, we came here completely unprepared," Jayflight replied sarcastically, though her tone held a certain lightheartedness, "I actually left my lungs in the Warrior's den, I should probably get those before we leave."

Hero couldn't help but grin at her remark, though Lilypool nodded to him as they approached. "We're ready, Hero. Thistlestar's just about to call a meeting."

"Well, we better hurry then," Hero decided; Thistlestar's meetings tended to be fairly brief and straightforward.

The cats fell in behind Hero as the padded back towards the center of camp, and as they approached, a pair of kits skipped along beside them, begging for them to recount their tales. Snowpaw didn't hesitate to fulfill their request, and the closer they came to the base of the Withered Oak, the larger their company seemed to grow.

"I bet I could've taken a Faction cat!" Stormkit had boasted at some point or another, while Greykit continued to listen earnestly to Snowpaw's stories.

"I heard Frostshine is retiring to become an elder," Lilypool began, as if in an attempt to strike up conversation. Hero blinked at her, seeming suspicious of her intent, and Lilypool groaned as she discerned his concern. "I'm not trying to hold a discussion because I feel left out, if that's what you're getting at here."

Her tone sounded almost offended, and she turned back to look ahead of them. Hero flicked his ear, following her actions. "She's Snowpaw's mother, isn't she?" He furthered, regaining Lilypool's attention.

"Yes, she is," she responded, "But I'm honestly concerned about her leaving. If she does, Dawnheart's going to try to take charge without a second thought, and poor Brightwillow will be left alone with her."

Hero chuckled, imagining the scenario for himself. Apparently, a previous kittypet named Sky was to be moving into the Nursery as well, she had discovered she was having kits and then taken Lark as a mate - specifically in that order. He considered using this as the next topic of conversation, when Thistlestar's voice called out above the commotion.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather below the Withered Oak for a Clan meeting!"

Hero and Lilypool seated themselves at the edge of the crowd that began to form, and Dawnheart ushered her two kits back towards the nursery, causing both cats to smile in spite of themselves. Snowpaw and Swiftpaw sat directly behind the two, while Smokewhisker settled on either side, and all waited expectantly for Thistlestar's announcement.

"As of now, I will be joining Hero and his team on a diplomatic mission to the city," Thistlestar reported, which had been previously implied, so the cats of AshClan had expected it. The next part of her statement, however, no cat could predict. "During my leave, Russetfire will serve as this Clan's temporary leader. In place of Russetfire, Foxspring will be taking the position of command. Thank you for your time."

The black and white she-cat surveyed the crowd, until she spotted Foxspring's bright orange fur standing out against the general dark colors of the majority of AshClan's inhabitants. He glanced at the cats around him, eyes wide with surprise, before he stood to make eye contact with Thistlestar. Hero saw him swallow nervously, astonished by the tom's sudden humble attitude. "I will do my best to serve in my leader's absence."

"Good," Thistlestar nodded, hopping down from her branch, and landing nimbly on the dust-covered ground. Foxspring received a few congratulations from nearby Warriors and Apprentices, though he was soon hidden from view by the larger cats who had begun to disperse. "Time to go, we're wasting daylight."

Hero hesitated, almost amused by her decision, though it was soon quelled by the look she shot him. "Let's go then."

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Much like the first time they journeyed to the city, the group made good time, and they reached the train tracks by sun high. They all quickly remembered the near death experience that had transpired here, and fell quiet as they crossed the tracks and headed on towards the city.

In due time, the group of cats came to a chain link fence, which was soon identified by an indignant Jayflight as the fence they had first tried to climb as they entered the city. "Alright, this might be a bit difficult," Hero informed Thistlestar, though he trailed off when the confident she-cat confidently strode past him towards the fence. "I don't think-"

His amusement faded into stunned silence as Thistlestar gracefully leaped onto the side of the fence, hooking her claws on the metal and scrambling up to the top with ease. "I climb a giant tree every day," Came her brusque explanation, and she shot them a wry smile before she descended on the other side of the fence, and strutting forward with a swish of her tail. "Keep up if you can."

"Awesome," Snowpaw murmured after a few moments of astonished silence, grinning as he followed her lead, scaling the fence with considerably less finesse.

One by one, each cat managed to clear the obstacle, and Hero again trotted to the forefront of the group, where Thistlestar appeared to be making her way forward in a leisurely fashion.

"You must be Thistlestar."

Hero picked up his pace to reach the leader just as seven cats emerged from the shadows; a number directly proportionate to Hero's own group of cats. He suspected they had been observing the Clan cats' approach since they had crossed the train tracks, by the state of some of these cats, there was no way this patrol had been originally designated to meet them.

"We've been awaiting you arrival," The voice belonged to Thug, who Hero guessed had been patrolling this area specifically to greet the

cats when they reached the city. He was, of course, accompanied by his regular team - Tags, Zero, and Bravo - as well as three cats who he didn't recognize, though judging by their expressions, they recognized him.

Thistlestar dipped her head to the East Faction cats, and all but Zero more or less returned the gesture. The fluffy white tom stared past her at Hero, with an expression he couldn't quite determine. "My younger sister joined your Clan."

"She apologizes for not having told you, but she can make her own decisions," Jayflight jutted in, the timbre of her voice more informative than rude.

"I understand that," Zero responded, sounding somewhat defeated, "I hope she's happy there."

Thug rested a tail on the smaller tom's shoulder, who remained placid.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Thistlestar smiled politely after her initial gesture, "Will you be escorting us back to your camp?"

A few more words were exchanged between Thistlestar and Thug after his leader's question, but Hero had become distracted by the six Faction cats who milled about behind him. Each one had their ears pricked attentively, and even Bravo seemed to glance warily at his surroundings every now and then. These cats were on high alert - Thug seemed relatively nonchalant about how long it had taken Hero to return, but he suspected that things were worse than he had mande them out to be. A dark grey spotted tom who stood near the edge of the group had a long scratch down his flank and a chunk of fur missing from his cheek, and by the look of the wounds, they were fairly recent.

"Hero, we're leaving," Lilypool jolted him out of his thoughts, and he looked away from the tom to see that Thistlestar and Thug had started off down the alleyway. Hero noted that as the Faction cats seemed to form a circle around them, Snowpaw unconsciously moved to the very edge of the group, positioning himself between Swiftpaw and the nearest Faction cat. Jayflight and Smokewhisker

lingered behind the group, waiting for Hero and Lilypool to follow.

"Right," came his aloof response, and he followed behind her without another thought as to the matter.

The East Faction cats were certainly more adept at navigating their own territory, and Hero soon found that they were being led along a route than was unbeknownst to all but those who travelled it. The camp was considerably closer to the train tracks than he'd first realized, and if he had to guess, Hero surmised that they had to be growing more desperate to take them down such a secretive route.

Even with the impending battle, the Faction camp was still bustling with movement. As they walked beneath the stone arches, still in awe of the complex stonework and architecture, Tags flicked her tail and broke away from the main group. The two battle scarred toms followed her dutifully, whilst the third unidentified she-cat inclined her head towards Thug before leaving in the opposite direction.

"What was that about?" Hero inquired, watching Tags with growing curiosity as she and her entourage continued towards a small building. As she did so, a few more cats around seemed to notice her presence, and entered the building in her wake.

Thug didn't turn to address him. "She was promoted to captain of the guard after your departure," he notified the tabby tom, and Hero could detect the subtle note of pride in his voice. "Youngest we've ever had, though she hasn't led any cats into battle quite yet. Not that she won't get her chance."

He finished the statement solemnly, and Hero slowed his gait to fall back among the cats of his own group. Snowpaw had just finished telling Thistlestar everything he knew about the East Faction camp whilst Jayflight pretended to be annoyed by his constant talking, only she seemed to be listening quite intently.

The building loomed over their heads as the group passed under the stone arch, and with an unhurried pace, proceeded to climb the adjacent flight of winding stairs that led to the uppermost floor. Thistlestar raised her head, ears swiveling forward as her posture

grew more dignified with each step they took. Few leaders could appear comfortable in such a setting, but Thistlestar was accomplishing this task quite easily.

"Thistlestar," Sunshine hailed his new guest, inclining his head towards her respectfully.

"I am honored to meet with you," Thistlestar resounded evenly, "Though I can't say I've had the pleasure of learning your name."

Sunshine gestured for the leader to follow him up onto his podium to talk away from the group, though she remained rooted to the spot where she stood. "These cats made this discussion possible. If we are to say anything, it will be said in front of them."

The large black tom nodded after a moment, attempting to hide his displeasure at her decision. The East Faction was many times larger than AshClan, and Hero assumed the leader was used to conversing privately in order to keep delicate information from spreading throughout of the masses. Still, he obliged to Thistlestar's demand, and began speaking.

"Very well," Sunshine began, seating himself in front of the group of cats though his gaze remained focused on Thistlestar. Zero and Bravo had stationed themselves on either side of the podium, indicating they were acting as Sunshine's bodyguards if something was to go wrong. The fur on the back of Hero's neck had begun to tingle. "To proceed with the attack, I'll need to be given an approximate number of cats you have-"

"You will be privy to that information once I have agreed to assist you in battle," Thistlestar interrupted, insulted by Sunshine's assumption that she had readily agreed to this battle plan. "I have not yet seen the evidence of this call-to-arms agreement, and I refuse to risk the lives of my own cats for a cause I know nothing about. I came here expecting to be convinced of your cause."

Sunshine stared at her for a long moment, expression unreadable. The cats around Hero tensed. "Fair enough," the cats let out muffled sighs of relief. "Follow me and I will show you the document."

Thistlestar stood to follow him, and Snowpaw hopped to his paws to bound after her. Hero knew he had moved too quickly even before Zero planted himself in front of the apprentice, tail lashing in warning as Snowpaw came to a halt in front of him, ears pinned back against his head. "That's far enough," he hissed, while Snowpaw's mouth remained glued shut, "We have openly invited you here to our home, and our leader is all but unguarded. Stay where you are."

"Hey," Swiftpaw snapped, and Hero flinched as she stepped in front of Snowpaw to face the larger white tom, "Maybe you should pick on someone your own size."

"I said they would come with me," Thistlestar reminded Sunshine, who had yet to have any say in the matter. His gaze was fixed on Swiftpaw.

"Swiftpaw, that's enough," Lilypool murmured in a stern undertone, "You two need to stay *out* of this."

For a few painstakingly long seconds, Swiftpaw continued to glare at the tom inches from his own face. Then she whirled around, ignoring Zero completely as she roughly nudged Snowpaw's shoulder. "Let's go," she growled, and the dispirited apprentice trudged after her.

"Keep your warriors under control," Sunshine muttered, posing it more as an instruction than a suggestion.

"I'll take it under consideration," came Thistlestar's faintly hostile response. She looked back purposefully at Hero and the other Clan cats, denoting that they were to stay behind while she continued to talk with Sunshine.

The four remaining cats obediently padded to the other side of the room, sitting as they watched the two leaders talking on the podium, though none could hear their words. After a few moments, the two cats continued into a chamber sectioned off from the main room, most likely Sunshine's own den. Zero and Bravo again moved to guard the entrance, and Thug passively watched the AshClan cats from where he sat beside the podium.

"I hope Swiftpaw and Snowpaw are alright," Lilypool sighed.

"They'll be fine," Hero consoled. He'd considered going after the two apprentices himself, but he found himself struggling to leave his clanmates in such a hostile environment. Besides, Swiftpaw and Snowpaw were most likely wandering around the East Faction camp. He doubted they would go far.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Hero was impressed by how still all three Faction cats had remained. Thug seemed to survey them unblinkingly, his mind obviously elsewhere, whilst Jayflight and Smokewhisker had started to have a debate on the importance of having a podium. Swiftpaw and Snowpaw were still gone, though Hero's mind were occupied with more worrisome thought.

Half an hour passed.

Lilypool had begun to pace, and while she stayed dead silent, she seemed to be thinking something over internally. Jayflight had apparently won the argument with Smokewhisker, and was now bored out of her mind.

"I can hear them from here," Lilypool announced. She had moved as close to the door as Thug had permitted.

"How does it sound?"

Lilypool was quiet for a moment. "Not good," she concluded, features creased with worry.

One hour passed.

Lilypool had been ushered away from the door by Thug; she hadn't been able to hear the leaders' conversation anyway.

"This sucks," Jayflight complained, sprawled out on the floor with her legs outstretched.

"I wonder why those pedestals are so far apart," Smokewhisker thought aloud, having spent much of his time observing the random

fixtures around the room.

Jayflight lifted her head to see what he was referring to. "I bet I could jump that far."

There was still no sign of the apprentices.

Two hours passed.

After her third attempt thing to leap from the windowsill onto the chandelier hanging from the cieling, Jayflight had finally conceded her fifth wager and was now being tended to by one of the Faction's caretakers for the cuts and scrapes she had acquired. Thug had traded places with Zero, who was now in charge of preventing Jayflight from doing stupid things, much to her annoyance.

Lilypool had fallen asleep in the corner, and was so motionless that Smokewhisker checked on her every now and then to make sure she wasn't dead. All four cats were hungry, and Hero had asked Jayflight's caretaker to look for Snowpaw and Swiftpaw if she has the chance. She had agreed, apologizing for not being able to feed their guests. They had none to spare.

All four cats suddenly jumped up when the two leaders pushed through the fabric that covered the chamber's opening in place of doors, Thistlestar staring directly ahead as she strode towards the center for the room.

"Perhaps if you weren't so close-minded-" Sunshine started, and Thistlestar spun to face him with such animosity he stopped his own insult short.

"Don't you *dare* talk to me about being close-minded," she spat, claws digging into the wooden floorboards as she stepped closer to him, and he waved off Thug, who had moved as if to intervene. "You're as good as dead without my help, I thought you would be mature enough to acknowledge that fact.

"My cats can more than hold their own," Sunshine objected.

"Oh, is that so?" came Thistlestar's incredulous scoff.

"I take it the meeting isn't going very well, then?"

Hero, along with nearly every other cat in the room, directed their attention to the source of the voice. Standing at the top of the staircase, fur hanging loosely from his lithe frame, a black and white tom stood between a pair of smaller apprentices. Thistlestar exhaled, a grin plastered to her face as if she had forgotten about the argument completely.

"You're welcome, losers," Swiftpaw yawned, before she and Snowpaw proudly strutted forward to join Hero and the rest of the Clan cats. Whiteshadow raised his chin, and when Thistlestar rushed to meet him, he buried his face in her fur. For a few heartwarming moments, Thistlestar rested her head on her son's shoulder, and he looked happy.

"They told me everything," Whiteshadow told her, fumbling over his own words as his emotions got the best of him.

"We have a lot to talk about," Thistlestar laughed, breathing deeply but refusing to break contact.

Whiteshadow nodded. "We do, but not right now," He agreed, then looking up at Sunshine, who waited expectantly for the reunion to end. "Right now, we have a call-to-arms agreement to negotiate."

They did share a few more words before they both broke away from each other, turning back to Sunshine. As they followed him back to the chamber to continue discussing the agreement, Whiteshadow looked over his shoulder, and though he said nothing, Hero knew what the look meant.

Thank you.

Again, sorry for the delay! Still working to get this story back on track. Tell me how you liked it in the comments!

~Frost

<------ Chapter Nineteen ------>

The sound of multiple pairs of pawsteps pattering against the floor made Hero look up abruptly. His gaze was greeted by the sight of Thistlestar leading the way towards them, Sunshine a step away from overtaking her and Whiteshadow trailing behind them on the Clan leader's other side.

Thistlestar's expression was unreadable, whilst Sunshine's face held a note of triumph, along with relief, as if he was glad of something's settlement, immediately telling Hero that they had reached an agreement.

"I have decided that the promise our first leader made is, indeed, real. We will honor that promise in respect of Ashstar, and join the East Faction in fighting the other Factions," the AshClan leader began, sweeping her sharp green gaze through the group.

Hero noticed Sunshine's ears twitch annoyedly as Thistlestar continued, and he assumed that this was one of the points that they had argued over. "If the battle appears to become hopeless, and we would achieve nothing other than losing more cats by continuing to fight, AshClan—and the other Clans, if they choose to join us—have the right to withdraw from the battle, but only upon mine or another Clan leader's command. I won't have my cats turning tail and running like cowards."

Hero could see why this agreement would have been difficult to come to. On one side, the Factions had no way of knowing whether the Clans would simply retreat as soon as the fight turned dangerous. On the other paw, Thistlestar couldn't squander the lives of countless Clan cats merely so that they could die as a united front with the East Faction cats, especially since it didn't directly benefit the Clan.

"With your approval, we would like you to join our allies in the West Faction, where we think you will be the most useful. You needn't travel all the way to the West Faction, just to the train tracks for planning, and then the battle itself. Does that suit you, Thistlestar?" Sunshine asked.

The Clan leader glanced at her Clanmates, taking in their encouraging looks before nodding sharply at Sunshine. "It does."

"Excellent! I understand you have a fair trek back to your camp, and, despite the many preparations that I'm sure you need to make, we would be happy to house you for the night, though we are rather short on prey at the moment."

Thistlestar cast a quick glance back at Whiteshadow before responding, and Hero knew what she was thinking: she wanted her son home and out of the city as soon as possible. "Thank you for the generous offer, but we should be able to make it back before nightfall. We wouldn't want to waste a second of time for preparation tomorrow anyways."

"As you wish," Sunshine replied, dipping his head. "I'll have a few of my cats escort you to the edges of Faction territory."

"We'll get going then," Thistlestar began, and she held the other leader's gaze for a second.

Sunshine pulled himself up to his full height, gazing down on them, his yellow eyes taking in the entire group of AshClan cats. "Farewell, then, and I hope we shall be able to meet once more under less arduous circumstances." The moment of solemnity swelled in the air for a while longer before it abruptly burst and the black tom turned to his fellow Faction cats. "Zero? Bravo?"

The cats who'd been called out rose to their paws silently, stepping forwards. Zero hung back, and Bravo came forwards to lead the way, stopping a few pawsteps away from the nearest Clan cat. The AshClan cats stirred too, those of them who'd sat rising and turning towards Bravo. The small black tom took a few more steps forwards, glancing back at the cats.

Hero stepped forwards, and the other cats seemed to make way for them. He was once again reminded that they'd come to think of him as a leader during the quest. The one who'd showed them the way.

But he pushed those thoughts to the back of his head as he stepped out of the way for Thistlestar. Their quest was over. They'd found Whiteshadow. Hero didn't need to be a leader anymore.

But they hadn't quite reached the end of the road yet. Now, many more cats had joined in on their journey, and much more was at stake.

Hero only hoped that they would succeed.

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Hero blinked awake as light stole into his eyes. He picked himself up, sitting upright as he shook his head like a dog ridding itself of water before squinting at the sunshine stealing through the opening of the warrior's den.

The memories of the day before hit him suddenly, and images of the faces of Sunshine and Thistlestar flashed in his mind, along with remembrance of the journey back to camp last night. The moon had creeped up high in the sky by the time they'd arrived, and he'd been too tired to do anything other than lay down and sleep.

Hero rose to his paws and began to pad towards the den entrance. Nobody else was in the warrior's den. He'd apparently been the last to awaken.

"Hero!" came a cry as soon as he stepped out, squinting against the glare of the sun. He waited a second for his sight to adjust before turning in the direction of the voice.

Many of the cats of the Clan were gathered under Thistlestar, who seemed to have called a meeting. Lilypool had called his name. The she-cat rose gracefully to her feet and came to where he was.

The meeting paused for a second as the cats stared at him before they turned their attention back to their leaders. Hero scanned the

crowd, finding each member of the party that had journeyed with him in turn. Smokewhisker, sitting a little ways from being directly under Thistlestar's branch. Jayflight, to his side. Swiftpaw and Snowpaw by each other, the respective apprentice's kin gathered next to them.

His gaze snagged on Roach. He narrowed his eyes. She was certainly fitting in quickly. The small Faction she-cat was sitting far closer to Foxspring than any normal recently acquainted cat should be, but the warrior didn't seem to mind very much.

"Hero," Lilypool's voice came once more, much lower in volume and closer to him, and he snapped his head over to meet her warm gaze.

"Lilypool," he responded as way of greeting. "Why'd nobody wake me?"

"Honestly? Nobody had the heart too. You looked half-dead last night anyways, and we figured the meeting could go without you for a while." She jerked her head towards their leader. "Thistlestar's already told everybody about the Factions and the fighting. Come along." She began to pad towards the crowd, and Hero trailed after her, flitting his gaze up to focus on Thistlestar.

"The West Faction have allied themselves with those of the East Faction, but even with our Clan aiding them, they will be sorely outnumbered, with three of the enemy' cats to each one of our own," she was saying, her sharp light green eyes switching from warrior to warrior.

Lilypool stopped besides Jayflight and sat, curling her tail over her paws. Hero followed her example, his neck craned up to keep his gaze fixed on the black-and-white she-cat above him.

"And for that reason, I have decided on another course of action. We will request the help of the other Clans."

A low muttering spread through the assembled cats, but none rose their voices in defiance. All of them knew that Thistlestar's solution was the only achievable one.

"I have decided to grant the task of rallying our fellow Clans to two of the finest amongst us," Thistlestar continued, and her gaze landed on two cats. "Swiftpaw and Snowpaw. Do you accept this task?"

Hero turned his attention to the two apprentices. There was a flash of something in Swiftpaw's eyes, but it was gone before he could make it out. Snowpaw rose slowly to his feet.

"I'm grateful beyond words that you trust us enough for this, Thistlestar," the white tom said slowly. He cocked his head to the side. "But will the other Clans be convinced by us? We're just apprentices - what's to say that they'll take us seriously?"

Thistlestar opened her mouth to speak, but she abruptly hesitated. A moment passed, and the leader seemed to run an idea over in her head before she spoke. "Just apprentices...why so? Why should you just be apprentices?" She drew herself to her full height. "The journey you took is just as good an assessment as any. And you most definitely did succeed - you are most certainly ready..." she trailed off for a moment before speaking up again, her voice fierce, "...to be warriors. To become warriors of AshClan."

Triumph entered Swiftpaw's expression and reigned there. Snowpaw's filled up with amazement and gratitude both at once, as if he couldn't decide on one.

"Really?" Swiftpaw asked, a note too loudly. Hero could see her run her tongue over her teeth before she spoke again. "We can really become warriors? Now?"

"Yes," Thistlestar said, her voice steady. "You can. Silentpaw." She inclined her head towards the mute she-cat that was Snowpaw's sister. "Your assessment was given and passed whilst Snowpaw and Swiftpaw were absent, was it not?"

The she-cat gave a nod of assent in response, glancing over at her brother.

"Then all three of you are ready to have your warrior ceremonies. Step forwards, apprentices of AshClan." Thistlestar's voice rang out

clear and loud.

As the apprentices took a few steps forwards, Hero turned his attention onto Swiftpaw's siblings, Crimsonpaw and Brackenpaw. Swiftpaw was abnormally young to become a warrior - would her littermates be jealous?

But as he sought out their faces in the mass of cats, he realized that their expressions held nothing but pride and happiness over their sister, and he was free to turn back to the three becoming warriors.

Hero sat back and watched, the same smile that curled over Jayflight and Lilypool's faces emerging on his as the apprentices took on the rank of warrior. Snowpaw beamed, and Swiftpaw lifted her chin high as both cats uttered the final words, "I do." Silentpaw nodded in her own way of saying them besides her brother.

"From now on, you will be known as Silentcry, Snowfeather, and Swiftstorm," came Thistlestar's steady words, and the Clan erupted in cheers of the three now warriors' names.

Snowfeather turned towards the other cats who'd gone on the quest, and Hero gave him a beaming smile.

"We'll go now," Swiftstorm called out loudly, and the cats quieted. She raised her chin, her expression fierce. "And we'll bring the other Clans."

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The sound of many thrumming paws made Hero look up. He was in the medicine cat den, depositing the herbs that he'd gathered along with Lilypool in preparation for the oncoming battle.

He ducked out of the entrance to the den. Cats around him were doing the same, coming out of whichever den they were in and heading towards the camp entrance.

The sound stopped, and a moment later, a group of cats ducked through the entrance of the camp. Hero picked up his pace until he was standing almost directly across from the entrance. Behind the

cats and the entrance, he could see a large group of cats, too big for him to properly make out through the entrance, all waiting.

With a jolt, he realized that the other Clans had come to aid them. He'd known they would - Swiftstorm and Snowfeather had raced back with good news on the tips of their tongues - but for some reason, it seemed to strike him anew, that all the Clans were coming together and allying themselves with the Factions. Two vastly different pieces of his world, the city and the wild, were coming together in unlikely alliance.

"Thistlestar!" one of the cats from the group that had come in called, and Hero recognized him to be Hawkstar, leader of BreezeClan. The cats around him were the other leaders, each standing next to their respective deputies.

"Hawkstar?" came the voice of Hero's own leader, and he turned to see that her slipping out of a group of senior warriors, who'd been planning strategies. She stopped in front of the group, her gaze focusing on the cats that waited outside for a moment before fixating on their leaders. "Silverstar, Duststar. I am glad beyond words to see you here - and along with all of your warriors, it seems."

"We must honor the promises that our ancestors have made," Duststar said, straightening. The old tom's eyes had a twinkle that belied his age.

"Indeed we must," Hawkstar responded, raising his own sharp pale yellow gaze to hers. "BreezeClan will stand with you."

Silverstar cut in. "As will WildClan."

Duststar dipped his head. "Along with MossClan."

An emotion flashed in Thistlestar's expression before being tucked away and replaced with professionalism. "My Clan is ready, and I assume yours are too." The she-cat raised her chin high, her expression fierce.

"Let us go now, and fulfill the wishes of our ancestors."

Hola, people. Apologies 'bout this being extremely late. Annco wrote about the first four-hundred words or so, and Duskie wrote the rest. Adios.

<------ Chapter Twenty ------>

The cats steamed over the hill, keeping stride with each other as if they were part of single living creature. Dozens of bright eyes trained on the gleaming streams of metal embedded in the gravel, illuminated by the light of the quarter moon.

The formation broke slightly as they reached the tracks, the majority of the group hanging back as the four cats who had taken the lead left its ranks, stepping further towards the distant city walls.

"I don't like it," Silverstar expressed, though it wasn't exactly clear what she was referring to.

Hawkstar managed to hold his tongue when Thistlestar issued him a warning glare.

"None of us like the prospect of battle," Thistlestar replied evenly, and Duststar dipped his head in assent, having been noticeable quiet for the duration of the trip. It was nearly moon high, and the Clan cats behind them were beginning to grow restless, though they had only just arrived. "Duststar, is there something you wish to speak about privately?"

The tom blinked back at her, then drew a shaky breath, lifting his chin as he faced the three leaders. "No, what I have to say if for all ears," he murmured, and Silverstar frowned slightly as all three cats turned their attention towards him, "I've been a leader for countless moons. MossClan has done well at avoiding conflict - perhaps too well, even, and it's a miracle that I've lived as long as I have. I don't want to retire and live the rest of my days in an elder's den."

"What are you saying?" Hawkstar questioned, sounding almost accusing of the older tom.

"I expect to die in this battle," Duststar clarified, then before the tom could interrupt again, "I have two wonderful daughters, and Rabbitflight will make an excellent leader. I will be leaving my Clan in good paws. But if I am to die, I want to do it fighting for everyone and everything that I love. This cause may not be our own, but I do not see why it shouldn't be."

Thistlestar nodded wordlessly, and both Silverstar and Hawkstar had fallen silent. "The cats of the city may not follow our codes and traditions, but they are our kin all the same. I will gladly fight on behalf of our brethren."

"I will fight," Silverstar agreed, light dancing in her eyes as she looked upon Thistlestar.

Hawkstar lashed his tail in determination. "I will fight."

"As will I," all four cats turned as Hero approached them, his head briefly bowed in respect before he raised it to further address them, "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all," Thistlestar shook her head, then stood again, turning to face the swarm of cats gathered at the base of the hills. "Thank you all for joining us. It is nearly moon-high now, the East Faction will be arriving-"

"Thistlestar!"

Yet again, a cat approached the group, though this one at a much faster pace than Hero had been going.

Thistlestar smiled politely. "Ah, Snowpaw."

"It's Snowfeather now," Snowfeather reminded her, and the black and white she-cat looked momentarily confused before she recalled his naming ceremony, "And we've got a bit of a problem - or, well, not so much a problem as a concern. Foxspring and I discovered something interesting on a perimeter patrol."

Hero and Thistlestar both shared a look, then excused themselves from the group as Snowfeather proceeded to lead them along the tracks, the three cats receiving brief greetings from the Clan cats assembled on the foothills. They soon spotted the mottled orange form of Foxspring in the pale grass, and the tom gestured for them to continue.

"What exactly..." Hero began to ask, then as a series of lights from across the plains caught his attention, he seemed to find the answer to his own question. "Oh."

The distant pinpricks of yellow light belonged to dozens of cars, all arranged in single file lines along the drab grey strips of asphalt that led away from the city. The roads had never been a concern for the Clan cats, though they did pass fairly close to WildClan's territory, but the sheer number of vehicles Hero could pick out from the darkness was astounding to say the least; and from what he could see, all of them were headed away from the city.

"The ground trembles," Foxspring murmured, sounding genuinely afraid, and each of the cat's expressions grew more perplexed. "A few days ago, when Harestripe was being exiled, he leaned towards me and whispered something into my ear before he was escorted from camp. He said, 'the ground trembles', and he looked me dead in the eyes, and that was it. Just those three words, and then he was gone."

Snowfeather's eyes had gone wide. "What if StarClan-"

"It's called an earthquake," Hero jutted in, as he suspected Snowfeather was about to collapse into somewhat of a divine paranoia, "The earth shakes, and sometimes buildings can collapse. Humans seem to be able to detect it even before cats can. They must be evacuating the city."

"This could be a blessing from StarClan," Thistlestar pointed out, a counterargument to Snowfeather's previous assumption, "The battleground will be cleared for this fight. Perhaps this is an omen. Perhaps, in a sense, the city is meant to be ours."

"I like that better," Snowfeather admitted.

"We should get back," Thistlestar decided, glancing at the moon as it finally reached its peak in the sky, "Our cats are waiting for us."

< ——————— >

"Good evening, madam," Hero greeted mockingly as Tags emerged from the shadows, a group of varied but intimidating Faction cats following at her heels. She only scrunched up her nose at him in disdain, marching herself up the wooden plank that served as a path onto thee abandoned train car where Hero had been stationed. "I suppose this is the special team I was promised, then?"

"It's bad enough that I have to share an equal rank with you, Timekeeper, I don't need you thinking you've got claim to my cats. I've got the Factions, you've got the Clans, we've got a battle to win."

Hero nodded, his amused smile melting away as he adopted a more serious expression. "Alright. Both the Clan and Faction cats have agreed to create a small, individual team, composed of cats with unique talents and abilities to go on an offensive strike," he explained, the other cats in the train car nodding though they had already been briefed, "And stop calling me Timekeeper."

Tags smirked. "Whatever you say, *partner*."

Hero rolled his eyes at her, though otherwise didn't acknowledge the remark. "Right, well, if we're all prepared, we might as well-"

"Hold on," Tags scoffed, cutting off his statement, "You're going into battle like *that*?"

He blinked back at her. "I don't have anything on."

"Well, yeah, that's sort of the point," she retorted, flicking her tail emphatically, "Armor? Weapons? What, do the Clan cats just go into battle completely unarmed?"

It was obviously a rhetorical question, but Tag's entertained grin quickly faded away when she noticed the confused glances that the Clan cats seemed to be sharing.

"Yes..?" Snowfeather murmured in answer.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Tags growled, glaring at Hero pointedly as he flicked his ears backward in a mockingly defensive stance, "Alright. Kilter, how much additional armor and weaponry do we have left?"

"Enough," came a the prompt reply from a bengal tom seated across the room.

"Good. Caprice, Author, Prentice, Meridian, Paradigm, Aurelian, fetch our remaining supplies to give to these idiot plains dwellers."

"Hey!" Hero objected.

Tags nodded shortly at the six cats who got to their paws, obediently exiting the train car in an orderly fashion and heading off across the train yard. Hero was trying to think of a good counterargument to Tags' insult, when a single she-cat took the place of the cats who had left. Thistlestar walked confidently, though as she sighted Hero and Tags, she let her tail sweep low against the ground in a gesture Hero wasn't quite familiar with. Tags, on the other hand, puffed up her chest with pride.

"Tags has sent for some weapons and armor," Hero notified his leader.

"I assumed, we had a similar issue," she laughed quietly, then lowering her voice as she leaned towards Hero, "I certainly hope these Faction cats aren't all bark and no bite. Looks that way at the moment."

Hero nodded in agreement, trying to hide his own grin when Tags narrowed her eyes at them, obviously having overheard the leader's remark. Thistlestar smiled, it was clear she'd meant for the Faction cat to hear it.

"So, it seems you're our resident strategist," Thistlestar began, turning back to Tags, who hastily plastered a smile onto her features, "Are you ready to present your battle plan?

"I am," Tags responded readily.

The group of cats filed out of the train car, heading towards where the majority of the Clan and Faction cats remained in the foothills. Smokewhisker and Jayflight had taken up positions on either side of Hero and Thistlestar, who were walking side by side, and Hero wasn't quite sure whether or not them acting as personal escorts was serious or a joke entirely. Either way, he felt flattered.

Hero watched as, one by one, the cats took their seats at the edges of the crowd, the Clan and Factions cats being careful to remain closer to their own leaders. They had formed a semi-circle in front of a large, overturned storage container, which Hero supposed was to be used at a sort of stage. He, Thistlestar, and Tags remained standing.

Sunshine, upon spotting the three across the milling throng of cats, gestured for them to approach the makeshift stage. Tags trotted forward after her leader, and Hero found himself looking at his. "I don't want to go up there," he murmured. He hadn't realized it until just then, but the churning in his stomach had only grown, testing the limits of his own confidence. It had never occurred to him that he might be afraid of addressing a large group of cats - it had never occurred to him that he might be afraid of *anything*.

Thistlestar frowned at him, noticing the restless swishing of his tail. "It's perfectly normal to be nervous about something like this."

"I've got it," volunteered a cat behind them, and Hero met the gaze of Lilypool, whose icy blue eyes seemed to instill an instant feeling of calm. Thistlestar nodded to her, and started towards the storage container, where Sunshine and Tags had stopped to discuss something. "Hero, you can do this."

"I don't know-"

"I'm not done," Lilypool stopped him, and Hero blinked at her before recomposing himself. "You can do this. This isn't something you're 'meant to do', you aren't here because of some prophecy or because you feel you have a duty to repay to the Clans, do you understand? You're here because you have to be. You're here to save your city."

"There might not be a city left to save," Hero muttered to himself, recalling the earlier incident where he had discovered that the city was being evacuated for an earthquake warning.

"What?"

"Hmm? Nothing. Thank you for your words of encouragement."

Lilypool furrowed her brow in confusion, but by that time, Hero had already flashed her a smile and was heading over to meet with the other leaders. He heard another set of paws following behind his own, and while he briefly assumed Lilypool had gone after him, he soon recognized the deliberately careful stride of Smokewhisker.

Hero flicked his ears. "You still intent on being my bodyguard?"

"Yessir," Smokewhisker replied good-naturedly, and fell silent when Sunshine turned towards the two toms. Hero quickly identified all four leaders among the small crowd, many joined by their deputies, and Sunshine with both Tags and Thug waiting for his command. Russetfire nodded politely at them both as they approached.

Hero quickly noticed an additional cat - easily distinguishable from the group, considering he looked exactly like his mother. "I was wondering if you'd ever show up," Whiteshadow teased, standing to meet Hero while Smokewhisker went to sit beside Thistlestar.

"So was I," Hero sighed, kneading the ground anxiously with his paws. "It's good to see you."

"We saw each other this morning," Whiteshadow reminded him.

"I mean, it's good to see you," he repeated, then paused as he realized that didn't make his meaning any clearer, "Here. Like this. With your Clan."

Whiteshadow looked at Thistlestar over his shoulder, smiling happily. "I know what you mean."

Sunshine wasted no time in signaling the cats that it was time for their announcement, and one by one, they climbed up the stack of wooden crates that had been conveniently arranged on the side of

the storage car. Smokewhisker gestured for Hero to ascend ahead of him.

"I'll be here if you need me."

Hero rolled his eyes, halting his progress to stare down at the grey tom. "No, you won't," he argued, stepping towards the side of the crate to make more room, "Because where I need you is up here with me.

Smokewhisker hesitated briefly, then huffed, and hopped up onto the crate next to him.

A few more leaps and they reached the top, the galvanized metal cool against the pads of their paws. Sunshine had positioned himself at the forefront of the container, a few paces ahead of the other cats who had situated themselves a bit further back, though they still remained in view of the cats.

For a few seconds, Hero could barely move. He'd known how many cats there would be; he'd had to run the numbers in his head several times to assure himself that they stood a chance against the South City Faction and its allies. But now, his eyes scanning the crowd, it seemed impossible that there was even a definitive number of cats. The bright pairs of eyes that trained on him flickered in the moonlight, their darkened forms fading into the distance and melding in with the night.

Approximately three hundred and fifty cats even with the addition of the second Faction who had yet to appear, and their enemies had even more.

They were so screwed.

"Greetings, cats of the Clans and of the East Faction," Sunshine yowled, his voice full of authority as it rang out over the crowd. The ambient murmurs instantly faded away, and the hundred of pairs of eyes focused on the black tom, who looked as if at any moment he could melt into the shadows completely. "We are gathered here tonight-"

"Our cats have been briefed on the situation," Silverstar cut in sharply, as the tom appeared ready to launch into an explanation, and it seemed that every cat within earshot could detect the irritation that laced her words. "If yours haven't, then that's an oversight on your behalf."

Thistlestar flinched, but otherwise didn't move.

"My cats know why they are here, and they know who their allies are," Sunshine responded, putting an emphasis on the last part of his statement in what Hero supposed was an attempt to reassure the she-cat as to their alliance, but by the way Silverstar clenched her jaw it was clear she hadn't gotten the well-intended meaning of his message.

"I'm sure they do," she growled, at which point a few of the cats began to share glances, "Where are the West Faction and their mystery leader, anyways? Shouldn't we at least know who we're dealing with before we race into battle beside them?"

Sunshine clenched his jaw. "I am not at liberty to give information which is not mine to give."

The fur along the back of Silverstar's neck began to bristle, and Thistlestar made as if to step in the middle of the two cats, while Sunshine continued to ignore the conflict entirely.

Hero nearly jumped when Smokewhisker nudged his shoulder, motioning towards the distant winding train tracks. Before Hero could ask what he was supposed to be looking at, he identified a pale silver and white cat outlined against the landscape.

"Thistlestar?"

The she-cat pricked her ears, turning in Hero's direction. "Hm?"

"You think you're so *high and mighty*," Silverstar hissed, as now Sunshine had whirled to face her, "Well, let me tell you something-"

"Oh, both of you, hush!" Thistlestar snapped, walking between them as stepped towards the edge of the container. More murmurs spread throughout the crowd of cats as one by one, each looked in the

direction of the train tracks. The graceful she-cat appeared over the edge of the hill, her silver fur catching the moonlight. Beside her, a large white tom with black tabby stripes kept pace, his long tail swishing behind him.

Like a tidal wave, the cats of the West Faction came streaming over the hill, their lithe frames making their movements look so effortless that Hero's breath caught in his throat. They threaded through the crowd, each taking their position in any space available. The two tabbies continued towards the storage car, and the she-cat scaled the crates with the larger tom in tow. "I apologize for keeping you all so long," were the she-cat's first words to them, and she promptly took a seat at the edge of the group, dipping her head customarily. "We'll have time for introductions later. I believe one of your cats has as battle plan to present?"

Silverstar sat back down between Hawkstar and her own deputy, Wolfsong, and the cats returned the West Faction leader's gesture. "Two of them, actually," Thistlestar corrected.

Tags and Hero took that as their queue, Hero's heart fluttering in his chest as Sunshine took a step back to give the two cats center stage.

"You ready for war, Timekeeper?" Tags simpered at him.

His claws dug into the rusted metal beneath his paws, and he exhaled. "Don't call me that."

Tags shook her head and laughed quietly, and both remained standing, following Sunshine's earlier example. Hero could still hear the faint honking of the traffic headed away from the city, he could still close his eyes and imagine that none of this was real.

Often, when he had done so, he would think back to the quaint little workshop he'd spent so much of his life in. He'd remember the warmth of the windowsill where he'd spent so many of his days, safe and comfortable, shielded from the dangers of the outside world.

Yet, all at once, he realized that he no longer thought of that place

as his home. If he'd learned anything at all, throughout all of his adventures, it was that his home was wherever he made it.

Tags opened her mouth, and she began to speak.

HAH YOU THOUGHT THE BATTLE SCENE WAS GOING TO BEGIN BUT YOU WERE WRONG

NO PLOT FOR YOU

i srry

~Frost

<------ Chapter Twenty-One ---->

"The majority of our cats will make up the first unit, and will be storming the South District through the city itself. We'll need to clear the North District first, but our attack will be more efficiently executed than theirs, and we should have the advantage."

Hero stood completely still, trying to remain patient as the brown tabby she-cat helped him to fasten the intricate straps and buckles attached to the set of armor that had been retrieved from the East Faction's camp. Neither of them had spoken the entire time, and it was clear that neither of then intended to.

The bands tightened around his chest with a satisfying 'click', and silent as ever, the she-cat padded off to assist the next cat in line. Hero stepped towards the basin of water by the side of the tracks, hopping up onto the edge to peer down at himself on the surface of the water. His form blotted out the reflection of the moon, creating a silver contour on the edges of his fur.

His own armor was primarily leather, as opposed to the clanking metal plates that many of the other cats he'd seen were clad in. It would help him move stealthily - the leather was black or dark brown, and the only metal fixtures were the blades that slid out of gauntlets, a special set of weaponry courtesy of Tags - though he doubted his soundless movements would be much protection against an army of enemy cats.

"The second unit, compromised mostly of Clan cats, will be entering through the water treatment plant and along the riverbank beneath the bridges. This will be a much smaller group, but they will hold the element of surprise."

Hero slipped his watch back over his neck, he had removed it to be fitted. He breathed deeply, listening to the ticking of the watch against the thrumming of his heart. He turned, about to step off the edge of the basin when he heard a crunching on the gravel behind him.

"You should really wear that," Lilypool suggested, nodding towards the odd, vaguely skull-shaped metal contraption lying a few feet away.

"I don't like it. It makes me feel like the enemy," he murmured.

Still, he remaining motionless as Lilypool picked it up, hopping up onto the side of the basin next to him. "Hush, you," she scolded gently, "If it prevents you from getting killed, it's worth it."

"Right," he mumbled, and an emotion that he couldn't quite decipher briefly flitted across Lilypool's features before she lifted the helmet and set it over his head. It certainly did resemble a skull; the metal plating covered most of his head, with holes for his ears and larger ones for his eyes that would not inhibit his vision, and two sharpened metallic fangs stretching from the muzzle and down over Hero's own. Lilypool fastened the two straps beneath his chin, securing it in place, and paying no mind to the daunting appearance it gave him.

"My nose itches," he complained.

Lilypool rolled her eyes. "Come on, Timekeeper. We've got a war to win."

Hero didn't bother to correct her, and the two trotted off towards the distant crowd of cats, who had begun to arrange themselves in battle formation. He took a deep breath, listening only to the ticking of his watch, and secretly wishing he could be so unfalteringly precise.

"We have three separate teams on covert missions. One, comprised of medicine cats and those with similar healing abilities will be our backup team of war medics, will be led by Fawnsoul and dedicated to removing injured cats from the battlefield and help to fix up the

ones who aren't hurt too badly."

The movements of the cats around Hero became a blur. He couldn't focus, and yet he couldn't seem not to. The world faded in and out of his vision in a whirl of color and sound, whispers travelled among the cats as they glimpsed the ominous helmet adorning Hero's head.

Lilypool was soon called away, and he redirected his course to the sidelines in an effort to escape the commotion, he spotted Foxspring conversing with Roach, the she-cat who had returned with him to the Clan. He wasn't sure what compelled him to do so, but as he came within earshot, he simply stopped and stood, watching.

"...and I know we've only known each other a short while, it's hardly been more than a week, but I just..." Foxspring was reasoning, too wrapped up in discussion to notice Hero was there at all, "We'll never know how this battle could end. There's no way to know what could happen to *you*."

Standing in front of the calico she-cat made Foxspring look so big in comparison. Roach held his gaze, her warm brown eyes trained on the orange tom's bright blue ones.

"What are you saying?" She asked simply.

He cleared his throat quietly, then paused, then cleared it again.

He inhaled.

"I want you to be my mate."

He exhaled.

It was a long moment before Roach moved, and when she did, it was only to cast him a faint smile. Then she stepped towards him, pressing her face to his cheek and burying her face in his fur. Foxspring looked stunned for a moment, his eyes wide, though when the she-cat stepped away from him Hero inhaled sharply.

"You're right. We don't know how this battle will end," she murmured, still smiling softly, "But I know how it will begin. How it

should begin. With the two of us as friends, fighting alongside each other in battle."

Foxspring nodded and returned her grin. "I would like that."

Hero ducked out of view as the two cats headed back towards the crowd, and he resolved to do the same.

"For our second team, we have chosen cats with the greatest speed and stamina from both Factions and Clans to act as battlefield messengers. They will be in charge of accounting for the cats lost in battle, and deliver news between whomever is in need of their service."

Hero easily picked out Tags among a row of armor-clad cats; her spotted coat was groomed to perfection, and she stood atop a crate, basked in silvery light as she finished putting on her own glimmering armor. Between her paws rested another skull-shaped helmet, and Hero realized how harmless his own looked in comparison. Hers was lined with teeth stretching along the jaw, clearly made to tear at the throats of enemy warriors.

"Hero," she greeted, if it could be considered a greeting; she said it rather dismissively, as per usual, and he stopped at the side of the crate.

"I think that's the first time you've said my real name all night," he chuckled, as she finished fastening the plated guard on her chest and turned to look down at him. In that moment, he recalled the conversation between Foxspring and Roach, and suddenly came to realize that this was the cat who would hold his life in her paws on the battlefield. She continued to watch him, curious. "I... I would like you to have this."

He shook off his helmet, and almost simultaneously, the watch around his neck slid off along with it. It landed agains the helmet with a clattering sound, and he carefully picked it back up again, leaping onto the crate and setting it before her.

She considered it for a while, and Hero couldn't read her expression past intrigue. Then the corner of her mouth tilted upwards, and she

looked directly into his eyes, their faces impossibly close to touching. "Your human trinkets will only slow me down."

With that, she bent over and lifted her own helmet onto her head, sauntering past him without another word.

The gesture itself would seem contemptuous to any cat other than Hero, and it took all he had not to laugh out loud. The cat who hated him with every living fiber of her being, who spent weeks trying to obtain the object he had just offered to her, who would rather kill than trust him, had just in her own subtle way told him that she considered him an ally.

No other feeling could match his satisfaction.

"Our third team consists of cats from both Factions and Clans, those with unique talents and abilities. Those who were overlooked, who were overestimated, those who are only now learning who they truly are. They will be fighting at the forefront of our battle, and together, we will defeat our foes. Together, we will take back our city."

He padded towards the gathering of cats that had broken away from the larger group. The chatter had lessened, and now each soldier was focusing on finding their commander and learning their task. Each combatant fell into line behind their superiors, their hearts racing with anticipation, the thrill of the fight plaguing their minds.

Three dozen cats sat before Tags, eyes trained intently on her as they waited for direction. Then, as Hero approached, they all at once turned to stare. Some looked at him with respect, others in awe, and some still appeared envious. Perhaps word had spread of his abilities, though Hero preferred to believe that Tags had boasted about his finder powers to their team.

Hero sat down wordlessly, beside where his own previous team had already assembled. Smokewhisker gave him a single nod.

"What do I do?" Snowfeather whispered to Swiftstorm, who was hovering oddly close to the snow white warrior.

"You persevere," Swiftstorm replied, not looking at him directly as she did so, "You can fight, and you can hope, and when it feels right, you can be afraid. But whatever you do, you can't ever give up."

Somehow, that sounded right.

< ——— >

The city was desolate.

It was unnervingly quiet as Hero and Tags marched their team into the streets, putting the train tracks behind them as the passed under the wall's arches and between the infinitely tall pillars of stone.

Three dozen cats padded behind them, their footfall soundless against the asphalt.

"We should be coming across a North Faction patrol in a few blocks, I've memorized the course they take exactly for such an occasion," Tags explained, though she'd already informed them of this, and was only mentioning it again to break the insufferable silence, "Remember that we were chosen specifically for this task; we must do our best to complete it. Does everyone recall our formation?"

She was answered with an assortment of grunts, nods, and mumbles of response.

"Course," chirped a tawny she-cat, not seeming to realize that the question posed was a rhetorical one, "Team Alpha, led by Tags, attacks from the right. Team Bravo, led by Hero, attacks from the left. Each cat has been paired with one or two others for means of organization, but also based on their individual strengths and weaknesses. They will also be responsible for accounting for each other before and after each attack."

Hero automatically looked over at Smokewhisker and Lilypool, who had been named his own partners at his request, and quickly noticed that they had done the same.

Tags flicked her tail. "Good."

"I'll scout up ahead," Kilter volunteered, then without waiting for much of an answer, bounded off down the street.

After a few more moments of silence, Hero found that the she-cat who had spoken before had picked up pace to meet his stride. "He's my mate," she boasted pridefully, as Kilter disappeared from view entirely, and Hero offered her a polite smile. "I'm Annelyse, by the way. You don't have to introduce yourself, I know who you already are. Tags wouldn't shut up about you."

Hero grinned. "I knew it."

"Don't sound so pleased, they weren't exactly good things," she added, then continuing with their previous topic of conversation, "Kilter's one of the best scouts in the East Faction. I was a rogue before I knew him, and I ran into an East Faction patrol that he as leading. I swear they were going to kill me, though Kilter insists that he wouldn't have let that happen. Never knew what love felt like until then."

Hero sighed quietly. "I know the feeling," he admitted, receiving a sympathetic glance from the she-cat. He shook his head to clear the thought. "We're about to charge into battle and here I am, complaining about my romantic life. Look, Kilter's coming back."

The brown bengal tom arrived a second later, breathing heavily with exhilaration. "They're passing through the point just up ahead, right on schedule," he reported, coming to a halt in front of Tags, "Looks like they're about to stop too, lucky for us!"

Tags smiled faintly. "Teams Alpha and Bravo, fall into formation."

With practiced movements, the group stealthily moved to the sides of the street, flanking the walls as they neared the checkpoint at which the patrol had stopped progress.

"It worries me," Annelyse murmured to Kilter, who padded quietly beside her.

"Don't worry about it," Kilter replied teasingly, pressing his nose against hers fondly, "You'll do fine."

Hero wasn't sure whether the tom had misinterpreted the she-cat's words; it sounded as if she was more suspicious about the convenience of the ambush, though she had sounded vague about it, and he reasoned that Annelyse's mate probably knew her better than he did.

Tags gestured for them to stop, her ears pricked to the sound of muffled talking. Hero's eyes warily flicked over each cat, accounting for them as if he expected them to disappear at any given moment.

The next few moments were a rush of movement.

There was no delay when Tags signaled the attack; the blades slid out of her gauntlets, catching the lantern light with a deadly flash, and their army surged past her and towards the huddle of cats. The night erupted into screeches and chaos as the cats leapt upon each other, Hero's legs carrying him forward almost without his knowing.

A swipe of enemy claws jolted him back to reality; he reflexively parried the blow with his own blades so forcefully that a sickeningly audible snap met his counterattack. Hero wasn't entirely sure whose bone had been broken until the armor-clad wailed and reared backwards, clutching his foreleg to his chest. Less than a second passed before the cat spun and fled - or rather, limped - away from the scene.

For a moment, Hero considered pursuit, until he saw the cat being tackled by Tags out of the corner of his eye. She raised her claws, slicing the blade downwards as the two were hidden among the swarm of yowling cats.

They were fighting a Faction now, claws and fangs didn't suffice. Hero couldn't help but compare the battle to one being fought in the rapids of a river - one wrong move, one mistake, and you were mercilessly pulled under the waves.

"Get your head in the game, Timekeeper!" Tags yelled at him as she stomped past, pelt flecked with blood.

The sound of rushing water filled his ears.

He dodged around cats locked in battle, their metal weaponry grinding against each other with an unnerving screech. The body of a cat struck his side, and only after he shoved them away did he realize that the cat was one of his own. Snowfeather stumbled before regaining his footing, barely even noticing Hero as he charged at the cat who had caused his fall. Swiftstorm appeared just before he stuck, winding between the larger cat's legs just as Snowfeather tackled him head-on.

Barely a second had passed before Hero felt something else slam not his side - though this time, it *was* an enemy cat, and in the short time it had taken for him to realize that, he was already locked in combat with the cat who had barreled him over. Hero kicked at the cat's underbelly, but she sprang away just in time, and he pushed himself back to his paws.

"End of the line, kitty," the she-cat hissed, coal black eyes flashing dangerously. She lunged at him, lashing out with jagged metal claws, and Hero instinctively tried to duck away. Her artificial claws connected with the metal casing on his head as he backed out of range, and Hero squeaked as the tips pierced the skin on his cheek.

He wheeled away from her, all too aware of her claws tearing into his flesh as he moved, and as the she-cat tried to release her hold, she found that the claws had been hooked into the metal. Noticing his advantage, Hero immediately dropped onto the cold stone and rolled beneath her, flipping the she-cat onto her back; wincing as her shoulder was yanked from its socket with brutal force. He scrambled to stand again, though there wasn't much of a need. The she-cat lay there, winded and unmoving.

"Kill me then," she stuttered, eyes fluttering closed as she licked the blood from the corners of her mouth, "*Kill me*."

The cat's chest heaved beneath her armor, pelt streaked with her own blood and the blood of the cats who had fought against her. Hero swallowed, visibly trembling. "No one deserves this."

The she-cat's lips twisted into a smile. "Then I'll kill you, *Timekeeper*."

She spat the last word as if it were an insult, and suddenly sprang at him, teeth scraping against the metal around his neck. Hero deftly clawed at her stomach as he was pinned to the ground, but felt only bitingly cold metal pressing against the pads of his paws, subduing his motions. For a moment, Hero was hopeful - there was no way the cat's fangs could puncture his armor, he could force her off of himself.

This sensation was short-lived.

The two metal pieces on either side of his nape were joined by a single leather band, and as his heart thudded with horror, she grabbed a hold of the looped material and tugged at it fervently. He gasped as it pulled tighter against his neck, the she-cat's good leg digging into his shoulder and pinning him down. Black rimmed his vision; with each breath he could feel a wave of numbness flowing throughout his body.

The weight was abruptly removed form his chest, the tingling in his limbs began to grow more painful as he began to regain consciousness.

Hero coughed, turning onto his stomach as the blood trickling from his cheek peppered the stone, the sound of frenzied yowls once again filling his ears. He tried and failed to stand up, paws now slick with his own blood, only vaguely aware of another cat helping him to his paws. His head now pounding, Hero turned, vision still hazy.

"You alright, Hero?" Smokewhisker asked, voice laced with sympathy as Hero felt the grey tom helping to support him. He could see more clearly now; the raging battle still continued a few feet away from where he had been cornered, and the she-cat he'd been fighting seemed to have disappeared. "I pulled her off of you, but she was gone by the time-"

"Timekeeper," Hero managed to choke out, as his own blood had now begun to drip into his mouth.

Smokewhisker frowned. "Thought you didn't like being called that."

"No, I..." he began, shaking his head to clear his thoughts, "She knew who I was, she purposefully singled me out. She called me Timekeeper."

Smokewhisker had led him a bit further away from the battle, letting him slump against the wall as he tried to regain his composure. "She knew who you were? How's that possible?"

"I don't know," he groaned, pulling at the leather band to loosen the clasp around his neck, "She couldn't have gotten that information, unless-"

"Unless someone had given it to her," finished the tawny cat who was now approaching them, tail swishing purposefully though her eyes were wide and afraid. "Hero, I think we may have a problem."

He exhaled shakily. "What kind of problem?"

A shadow blotted out the light from the lantern mounted on the building behind him, and all three cats turned to meet the bright blue gaze of the looming figure. Hero's heart skipped a beat.

Bling smirked.

"Hello again, friend."

NO AUTHOR'S NOTE FOR YOU

~Frost

<------ Chapter Twenty-Two ---->

Hero stared up at his friend in shock; surely this was some sort of joke. "B-Bling?" he choked out, desperately hoping that his friend would laugh and deny it.

Instead, he smiled. "That's right, *Timekeeper*." Hero bared his teeth in a snarl. He thought he could trust that traitor!

"And *what*," Hero spat, "addled your brains enough to make you join in the Factions' war?"

Bling glanced to the side, shifting on his paws. "The battle is not going well for your cats, Timekeeper. How wonderful it will be to finally see you defeated." Hero blinked in confusion and anger. Bling was supposed to be his friend! Why was he suddenly wishing for Hero's death? And why didn't he answer Hero's question?

"Why do you want me dead?" Hero hissed angrily, whilst assessing the battle out of the corner of his eye. Bling hadn't been lying; the battle really wasn't going well for the Clan and Faction duo.

"Oh, Timekeeper, you're so naive," Bling said patronizingly. "I simply realized the truth." Once again, Bling glanced to the side nervously, appearing to be awaiting something. Hero inspected the same spot, but he saw nothing of interest.

"What truth?" Hero asked, trying to keep Bling talking so that he could come up with a plan.

"Oh, look," Bling purred teasingly, seeming to notice something behind Hero. "The life of the party's just arrived."

Hero turned to see a group of North Faction cats leap out of hiding and fall viciously upon the unprepared Clan cats, taking them by surprise and easily gaining the upper hand. As Hero turned back to

Bling, the traitorous cat once again glanced to his side. Copying his motion, Hero saw the tip of a dark tabby tail disappear into the gap between two buildings. Before Hero had time to ponder this, Bling and one other Faction cat leaped upon Hero and pinned him to the ground, making him pay for his momentary distraction.

Hero pushed up with his hind legs, trying to use his front paws to execute the familiar belly rake, but his claws slid harmlessly off of Bling's armored stomach and Hero bit back a curse. The second Faction cat lunged for Hero's throat, but he was stopped by Annelyse, who knocked the Faction cat into Bling with a sharp head butt.

Bling lost his footing, allowing Hero to slip out from under his grasp, giving Annelyse a grateful look. Before the other Faction cat could get back to his paws, Annelyse had him pinned and tore his throat out mercilessly, with much more skill than Bling's clumsy attempt to take Hero's life.

Bling launched himself at Hero once more, and he and Annelyse fought side-by-side, alternating attacking and defending. Bling feinted to Hero's left and Hero dodged right, realizing his mistake too late as he stumbled in his haste to correct himself and lost his balance. Bling lunged in for the kill, and his jaws closed with a resounding *snap!*.

Annelyse fell limp and blinked in confusion, seeming to look down at the blood issuing from her throat in slow motion. She collapsed to the ground, landing in a pool of her own blood.

"Tell..." she choked out, "Kilter... I love him." Hero nodded mutely, in shock as her body went still. Annelyse had saved him. It felt to Hero as though the battle was over. Why weren't both sides ceasing their fighting in order to honor the brave cat that lay before him? But the battle wasn't over, Hero realized. There was still one piece of unfinished business.

"Bling."

Hero launched himself at his old friend, anger burning like the Fire Plains in his veins. Annelyse was dead, and an image of her dying

expression seemed to be branded into Hero's vision, making the scene before him seem almost ethereal. He bowled Bling over, biting and clawing indifferently, not caring where he was striking, knowing only the need to avenge the dead cat whom he had known for a short while.

Hero's claw caught on the edge of Bling's armor, tearing it off in his deadly frenzy. His claws struck flesh and he finally came to his senses as Bling went limp beneath him. He stumbled a few pawsteps away, fighting the urge to retch. He had just killed his best friend. His best friend had just tried to kill him.

The world spun as Hero turned desperately towards the battle, hoping for good news, but there was none to be found. The Clan cats were losing badly, outnumbered by the Faction cats two-to-one. Foxspring was single-pawedly fending off three Faction cats, when a lesser cat would have died fighting one. Behind him, Roach was holding and injured paw off the ground, swiping at the attackers whenever she saw an opening.

One of the Faction cats lunged for Roach, seeing her weakness, and Foxspring intercepted them, slamming his shoulder into the cat's chest. Foxspring's shoulder was pushed out of its socket from the force of the blow, and Hero could almost hear the sickening *pop!* of the bone leaving its position.

The Faction cat went for Foxspring's weak side, raking his claws along Foxspring's flank, causing the warrior to yowl in pain. Still, he persevered, swiping at his attacker with his good paw and trying to bite his sides, but the fight was hopeless. The Faction cat knocked Foxspring off his paws, and, confident that he was defeated, stepped over him and towards Roach, who cowered back.

As the Faction cat knocked Roach onto her side and prepared for the killing blow, Foxspring got to his paws and shoved himself between the cat and Roach, falling limp as the Faction cat's sharp armor and teeth tore down Foxspring's flank. Roach would have become his next victim, had not Estelle and a group of Haven cats come to the rescue.

They joined the fight, helping to even the numbers and send the

Faction cats fleeing. Hero's attention was still, however, on Foxspring and Roach. Roach was crouched over Foxspring's body, licking his wounds desperately.

"Foxspring, don't die! Please! Your Clan needs you! The Faction needs you!" Roach hesitated, sniffling. "*I* need you!"

Foxspring groaned opened his eyes. "You... Need me?" he got out.

"I need you and I love you I don't want you to die!"

Foxspring sighed resignedly, as if at peace with his fate. "StarClan are ready to take me, Roach. There's nothing you can do for me now." He hesitated, his breath coming in short bursts. "Except... Will you give me one last bit of happiness before I must leave forever... And agree to be my mate?"

Roach's breath caught as she sobbed. "Yes! Yes, Foxspring, I'll be your mate and I'll never forget you!" She buried her face in Foxspring's cheek, ignoring the stain of blood.

"Happy..." Foxspring muttered. "That makes me..." With a sigh, his body went limp and his eyes turned glassy. Hero blinked back tears and felt a lump in his throat. First Annelyse, then Bling, and now Foxspring? How much more loss would he have to face?

"Annelyse!" Hero turned to see Kilter staring down at his dead mate, aghast. With dread, Hero approached.

"She died defending me against Bling. She- she told me, before she died, to tell you that she loves you." Kilter blinked back tears.

"She was brave... She wouldn't hesitate to save another cat. She would have liked this death. A noble death. I only wish that I had whoever did this within my jaws," Kilter growled.

"His name was Bling," Herk said. "I thought he was my friend, but... He betrayed me. I would have died if it weren't for your mate. I killed him." Saying the words made it seem all the more real to Hero; he had killed Bling. He had murdered his old friend without mercy.

Unable to stand it any longer, Hero wandered away from the area, turning towards the scene of the main battle. He watched as a dark-furred loner grabbed Foxspring's body and began dragging it in the general direction of the Clans, seemingly distraught. The loner must have felt bad for the Clans and decided to aid in helping return bodies and injured cats to their leaders... Although Hero was almost certain that the cat looked familiar.

Shrugging, he gave Roach his shoulder and helped her towards Estelle, who was acting as a healer. Hero stared at the blood-spattered clearing as they passed it, and at his own dented armor. This was only the beginning.

This was written by le Amazing Annco! I hope Foxspring's death made you cry... I feed off of innocent readers' tears. Mwahaha!

<------ Chapter Twenty-Three ---->

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

An uncomfortable silence dragged across the atmosphere, mimicking the claws dragged upon dry ground in the battle they recently witnessed. White noise, static as a brewing storm, spattered across Hero's mind and hauled him into a sense of disorientation, his steps automatic and puzzling to him. How could he keep going after what he'd seen? How could he continue to walk with ease when Foxspring could not move at all? His own privilege disgusted him, but it reminded him time was short. That crimson smudge would forever remain in his heart.

He sensed Roach's retained despair as she walked, breaths sharp and painful. He turned away, not wishing to envelop himself in negativity, though that was the path he trod. Estelle kept her eyes forward with sympathy silent and rather curt, while Lilypool and Smokewhisker trotted side by side exchanging brief words to one another. He didn't care to listen to what they spoke of, it would only intrigue him. He shook his head as his motives became unclear. Why was he doing this? *Whiteshadow*, he repeated, *Whiteshadow*.

A hush of commotion became audible further in the distance, and Hero perked his ears upwards to hear. Juvenile voices, it seemed, ones of sharp words and an unwanted ruckus. Their silhouettes became visible in the distance after a short while, and expression became bold when their eyes met. Three small cats, apprentice age by Clan law, gaining on them with ragged pelts and menacing glares.

"Hey! You!" one hollered, receiving a chorus of urges from his companions.

Hero ignored them, pretending he hadn't heard their feeble

attempts at intimidation. Smokewhisker growled, but he was soon calmed.

"Hey! Look at me when I'm talking to you!" he cried again, smiling arrogantly.

He grunted, unimpressed, but it seemed Smokewhisker rose to the task of dealing with such a nuisance.

"Why don't you watch your mouth, runt?" he challenged him, spitting at the small cat as they came closer.

"What did you just call him?" a slightly heftier member hissed, stepping towards him. "I said, what did you call him?!"

Smokewhisker smirked, scanning the reddish-brown imbecile up and down until he was satisfied he would win in a fight against him.

"I called him a runt, he couldn't fight a mouse," he scoffed. "Beat it."

Hero eyed the third, silent cat observantly. Though his face remained placid, he could sense a fire brewing behind his amber eyes, feel his fury begin to churn in his blood. He glanced across to Smokewhisker who, in his element, seemed rather proud of himself, while Estelle, Roach and Lilypool hung nervously behind. Hero didn't like the look of the silent cat, and the silent cat didn't like the look of him.

"Want to test that little theory?" the smallest cat of faded grey tabby markings spat, unsheathing his claws.

"I might," Smokewhisker smirked, copying his stance, "what does it mean to you?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Hero caught sight of the silent cats fur flare upwards, a pair of sharp fangs glinting in the light behind his tufted brown mane. He arched his back and prepared to leap, and Hero caught him in the act.

"Everything."

He launched himself towards Smokewhisker, tearing past Estelle, who dragged Roach away as she sobbed. The similarity pained her, it seemed, though it left the two remaining cats vulnerable. He tore into Smokewhisker, but he defended himself skillfully, batting away his fiery attacks with solid kicks of his paws. Lilypool's eyes darted back and forth, her mind torn, and with a single wrong move, Smokewhisker fell out of sync. The silent cat caught his chest and he fell from the impact, landing with a thud against the dusty ground.

"Get him, Sphinx!" the grey tabby encouraged nastily, cheering for his friend.

Sphinx grinned deviously, raising his paw to strike, but with one bold move he was thrown off from his moment of glory.

"Get off of him!" Lilypool cried defiantly, sinking her teeth into his back and attempting to pull him off.

He growled and hissed at the pain seeping into his bones and shattering down his back. He swerved, twisting back to attack and giving Smokewhisker enough time to squirm free. He hopped away, proud, calling back to Lilypool.

"Get him, Lilypool!" he mimicked him.

"Don't worry, I've-."

Her battle cry was cut short. As she strained her neck over Sphinx's shoulder to call, he took his chance. He slashed his paw viciously against her throat, slicing her skin and disturbing an eruption of blood pouring tirelessly from the wound. Lilypool wheezed, air knocked from her lungs, and she tumbled forward. The battle stopped. Sphinx stepped back, a little horrified at his actions, and his friends ordered for them to flee. Their pawsteps thundered back into the distance, commotion leaving with them, and the white noise grew static once again.

Static as the quiet wails pulsing from her.

"Lilypool!" Hero cried, rushing forward.

He observed her wound, wincing at the damage. Her breathing had been severely impaired by the slice, blood frothing from where air should've passed through with ease. He glanced upwards to Estelle, who whimpered a touch.

"Can you move?" she asked with a small voice, brushing her tail against her.

Lilypool gasped, agonised and paralysed with pain and fear. Hero shook his head, worry and nervousness filling his lungs.

"We need to get her somewhere safe," Estelle ordered knowledgeably. "Roach, do you know a place?"

The grief-stricken she-cat nodded. "There's an empty building down the path, you can find shelter there."

Her uninterested, dejected tone filled Hero with only remorse and broken hope, but he took what he could get. Smokewhisker nudged his friend, his nose sinking deep into her fur. Guilt splattered against his expression, despite the fact it was clear he held Sphinx responsible, rightfully so. He signalled to Hero, who took her hind legs in an attempt to carry Lilypool with him.

"Aren't you coming?" Estelle asked despairingly, time slipping through her claws.

Roach shook her head. "I'll just get in the way."

She turned tail and began in the opposite direction, head hanging low and swinging to a downbeat tempo. Estelle hurried a few steps forward, calling after her, but to no avail. She sighed, defeated.

Hero's heart fluttered with masked fear as he felt Lilypool's strain surge through her body. He knew he saw something in that cat, knew he was dangerous, and if he had spoken, perhaps she'd be okay. It was *his* fault, not Smokewhisker's, and he wasn't sure if he could carry that burden. His breathing escalated and he whipped his head around, impatient and desperate.

"Are you coming, Estelle?!" he hissed, aggravated.

She cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm sorry, let's go."

"Go on ahead and find that building, we'll be alright," Smokewhisker suggested assertively, and she did not argue.

As Estelle hurried on ahead, galloping like a wayward deer towards a small block of rejected buildings up ahead, Hero felt Lilypool's tail drag against his ear. It quivered slightly and he frowned, her fear unable to be contained as the life drained from her throat. He heard Smokewhisker murmuring soft words to her, sensing her fear, and he only wished he could provide such comfort. He only knew she had limited time and that they had to hurry; time orientated was he, and he cursed himself for it.

To his surprise, a set of pawsteps gained on them once again, and they were met with a flustered Estelle with eyes wide and chest thumping. She skidded to a halt.

"We have to hurry," she ordered, dragging Smokewhisker along with her.

He protested, mindful of Lilypool. "Why? What's wrong?"

"They're coming back, and they're bringing more cats, older, bigger," she sputtered, pulling them forward.

Hero felt his heart lurch as the mortifying chanting of a large band of cats became apparent over the anxious white noise engulfing his mind. He could just see their claws now, defined and polished, sturdy and pointed. They pressed on forward, paws almost tripping over one another, until Estelle turned into the nearest building. It creaked as they retreated inside, a musty scent lingering which Hero turned his nose up at. He and Smokewhisker lay Lilypool against the wall, bordering up the door with as many materials as they could gather before the cats came for them. A race against time, and they were losing.

"Where are they, Sphinx? Lead me to them!" one cat screeched, their voice deafening.

Smokewhisker sprang into action, paws stiff. "I'll fend off any cat

who spots us, stay with Lilypool, Hero."

He gasped gently. "You can't handle them alone."

"I'll have to, won't I? Lilypool needs someone with her, not just Estelle. Concentrate on what matters, will you?" he told him patronisingly, scaling the wall and slipping through an open window.

"You mean to say you don't matter?" he questioned him, watching his tail swish back and forth.

"No, but Lilypool matters more right now, wouldn't you agree?"

He glanced back at him, frowned, and nodded. Estelle scraped the few lifelines of moss she could find into her paw and pressed it against her wound, the blood soaking and darkening it almost immediately. She croaked, eyes barely open, until a thud of the building prized the weariness from her soul. The world seemed to shake, their haven unstable and ready to collapse.

"We can't stay here, it's not safe," Hero warned Estelle urgently.

"What else can we do?" she questioned him.

"I won't last."

Lilypool's gasps caught their attention, and Hero slid to his belly in an attempt to understand her. She locked eyes with him, desperation and hurt dulling her blue eyes grey. He winced, extending a paw for her to hold, hoping it could provide some comfort.

"I'll die," she spoke swiftly.

He shook his head. "No no, you mustn' think that. It'll be okay."

He knew he was kidding himself, for she didn't believe him, and he didn't blame her. he didn't believe him either. Smokewhisker rattled the roof as he confronted a trespasser, but he thought nothing of his movements. Their words exchanged were a little more gentle than he imagined, and with more attention paid he began to realise he

was giving this cat way.

"Smokewhisker?" Estelle called up. "What's going on?"

He leaped down from her post, waiting for his conversation to join his. When they did, an apparent tom-cat, his eyes shot towards Lilypool's wheezing figure, and his frame seemed to freeze. *Who is he?*

"Lilypool..." Smokewhisker began, taken aback by her deteriorating figure. "You had a brother, didn't you?"

A smile formed through her pain as the tom-cat gained on her, their resemblance apparent the moment both were seen together in frame. He bent down and nosed her, casting Hero aside, and he watched without words as the two rejoiced quietly together. Though she relaxed into his scent, his presence, he found she stiffened a little as he touched her. The cat gazed down with sad eyes, his tail swishing.

"Duskpaw..." she trailed away.

"It's just Dusk, now," he corrected her, swallowing his emotions to shed alone. "I don't deserve that 'paw now."

He settled down, wrapping his tail around his paws and staring her down with sincerity and hope. "I waited so long to find you, so long to tell you I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she breathed, extending her paw. "I will always forgive you."

He shook his head viciously, grinding his teeth. "I don't deserve forgiveness, Lily, and I never will. I'll never amend what I did, I'll never prove myself to you, MossClan, or our leader. I'll always be a murderous psycho, always. I still hear MossClan screaming that, still see you leaving our home because of me."

His voice broke as he finished his speech, and Hero couldn't help but bite his tongue in respect for the cat. Smokewhisker however, was not as forgiving.

"What in StarClan's name did you do?" he questioned bluntly.

"I..." he began, digging up memories like digging up a grave. "I went mad, one day, and I tried to kill our leader, MossClan's leader. They exiled me, and Lily moved to AshClan. Thistlestar promised she'd keep her secret, the secret about her-."

"Her brother... yes..." he completed his words for him, the story one he'd heard before to some extent.

Lilypool touched his paw weakly, her smile feeble. "I forgive you."

"They're in there! Get 'em!"

The sound of nearby voices in dangerous numbers snapped the siblings from their reunion, a callous rattling turning to thundering as the walls were scratched and ripped apart. Smokewhisker scarpered to his post, but when he saw the ruckus from outside, he couldn't bring himself to leave security.

"There's too many of them to fight!" he cried, outraged.

"We have to try," Hero encouraged them. "Even if we die, we must try."

Lilypool heaved, moaning. "No..."

She wheezed, her voice croaking to a pitiful mewl as her life drained away, blood dripping down her chest. "You go... all of you... I'll distract them..."

Hero's eyes widened, and he stomped his paw. "No, I won't. I can't do that to you."

Estelle brushed against his shoulder, urgency in her eyes. "Hero, Lilypool's dying, there's no use in trying to save what we've already lost. She's right, we need to leave."

"For Whiteshadow," Smokewhisker reminded him. "He's who we came for."

Hero glanced around, outraged. "We can't just leave her! What's

wrong with you all?!"

Dusk halted in front of him, a flame of determination sparking in his eye. "I'll stay with her, you go. You've bigger things to die for."

Hero shot a sharp look at Lilypool, who nodded in approval. Dusk kept his distance as Hero sighed in defeat, knowing escape was his only way to continue forward. For Whiteshadow, he had to sacrifice his friend. His friend...

"Lilypool, I don't want to leave you," he began, starting towards her.

"I know," she rasped, smiling feebly at him as he placed his paw upon hers.

Hero felt a certain awkwardness fall upon him as he stared into her eyes, his heart fluttering. Even as blood soaked her fur, her eyes dull and face gaunt, he still saw a certain perfection in her features. He couldn't lose that, but he had no choice.

"You're remarkable Hero, you know that?" she strained against lifelessness, catching his attention.

"W-What?"

She settled into a comfortable position, resigning to her fate. "You can find anyone or anything you put your mind to, but you can't see love when it's staring you in the face."

Hero froze, his bones frosted and left for dead. He stared into her eyes again, those words swimming in his mind as his mouth gaped, his heart pounded, his paws longing to drag her away to a land where she could live. Live with him. All too late, it seemed, Hero found the reasoning behind the butterflies locked in his stomach, and the answer lied in Lilypool as she lay dying before him.

"Come on Hero!" Smokewhisker screeched, grabbing hold of his scruff.

"No!" he protested as she dragged her away. "No! Let go of me! No!"

Estelle latched onto him, their force something he couldn't match,

and he screamed as Lilypool faded from sight, her eyes now fixed on her brother. Hero felt his heart shatter as his legs told him to run, the band of cats focused on the two remaining siblings inside that musty building. He cursed the sun for it's light, cursed the moon for it's dark, cursed the world for unveiling the light in his path of darkness as that light burnt out. Lilypool was gone, and his world remained dark.

"Dusk...?" Lilypool croaked towards him, panting away her final breaths.

"Yes, Lily?" he asked, tears in his eyes.

"You forgot something... when you left..."

"What did I forget?" he questioned her.

She gasped. "Your warrior name... Duskp-pool."

She spluttered, choked, found a smile in her to die with, and with that Lilypool let life wash away from her as the cats broke free of their barriers, charging into the building. Dusk screamed her name, wailed a battle cry fiercer than anything he'd spoken before. He fought relentlessly with her in mind, but she wasn't around to see him slash the hearts of those who slashed her throat.

Lilypool left with a hero in mind, just as she always wished to die.

~I'M NOT CRYING YOU ARE. Man, this was brutal to write. Written by Hazel, who's honoured to have written such a sad chapter for a book she love from the start~

< ------ Chapter Twenty-Four --- >

"We have to go back," Hero choked out, as Smokewhisker half-dragged him away from the scene. Screeches echoed from the building, and the harder he tried to block them out, the deeper they penetrated his skull.

"We *can't* go back," Smokewhisker grunted, releasing a shuddering breath as he released his grip on Hero, and the tabby tom did all he could not to slump to the ground. "There won't be anything to go back to. We'll... we'll come back for them later."

Hero's heartbeat felt hollow in his chest.

Estelle nudged Hero's shoulder comfortingly. "We have to keep moving," she murmured softly, "Dusk and Lilypool bought us some time, but those cats are going to come after us again."

"She's right," Smokewhisker agreed, glancing over his shoulder at the building behind him, the fur on the back of his neck bristling in anticipation. "They'll be after us before long, we need to-"

"Estelle!"

The shout nearly made Smokewhisker jump, and he whirled to face the small black-and-white she-cat with such violent speed that she nearly tripped trying to leap out of the way.

Estelle stepped past Smokewhisker, shooting him a look as she proceeded to approach the frightened cat, who seemed to relax upon seeing her. "Firefly, do you have something to report?"

"Took me ages to f-find you," Firefly informed her, then to keep from stuttering, paused to take a few breaths. When she looked back up at Estelle, her fiery amber eyes were wide with urgency. "The tremors have reached the North District near the plantation,

they're headed towards the North... nor..."

Smokewhisker darted towards Firefly and managed to catch her before she collapsed, chest heaving as her pupils narrowed to slits. "The North Faction camp?"

Firefly nodded absently, confirming Smokewhisker's suspicions, and Estelle helped him to stand the small she-cat upright again.

Hero caught Smokewhisker's gaze. "That's where Tags' team is headed."

"Right," Estelle murmured, "Firefly, there's a safe point down on Liberty street, can you get there?"

Firefly nodded again, breath still small gasps, though she managed to remain on her paws. A faint smile flitted across her features. "Course I can, I'm the fastest cat in Haven."

Estelle smiled back, and flicking her tail in farewell, Firefly started off at a trot down a darkened side street. Once she was out of sight, the cats all turned to Hero.

"Right..." Hero said, pacing slightly as he thought. "We can either rejoin the main battle, or go and help Tags and her cats, despite the dangers the tremors pose."

Snowfeather spoke up. "It's not just Tags' team, Swiftstorm and Jayflight are there, too. We have to help them!" He turned appealingly to Smokewhisker and Estelle, who were nodding.

"We can't leave them," Smokewhisker added.

"It's foolish to head into a danger that you can't fight..." Estelle began. "But we can't leave our cats behind."

"Then let's go!" Hero said, bounding through the streets towards the North Faction, ignoring the jolting pain that each step sent through his body. He tried not to focus on the dull ache that was spreading not through his body, but through his heart. Lilypool was dead. Foxspring and Annelyse were dead. Bling was a traitor. And now Swiftstorm and Jayflight were in danger. Would it never end?

Would the deaths keep mounting and mounting, until none were left?

Hero's paw caught on a rock, and he stumbled, shaking his head slightly to clear it. *Get your head in the game*, he told himself, putting Lilypool and the others into the back of his mind. As they ran through various streets and side alleys, the ground began to shake slightly, causing debris from various buildings to come raining down upon the pavement.

"Over here!" Estelle cried, bounding a few tail-lengths down a side-road and crawling underneath the belly of an abandoned twoleg monster. As the other cats followed, Hero hesitated. Abandoned or not, monsters were still dangerous, weren't they? Unbidden, memories of Lilypool filled his mind. Her dying words to him, the look in her eyes. The way her fur shone in the light, the way she held herself with poise and confidence.

"Hero, come on!" Smokewhisker yowled, as the tremor grew stronger and more debris began to fall. Hero turned on the spot slowly, blinking uncomprehendingly at the cats' beseeching faces peering out from under the monster.

Snowfeather darted out from underneath the monster and forcibly shoved Hero forward, causing the larger cat to come to his senses and clear his mind of Lilypool, bounding forwards to crawl under the monster, Snowfeather at his tail. As dust and rock continued to fall, Hero turned to the white tom crouched behind him. Though the various bits of falling debris were unlikely to kill at cat, Hero could have very easily been injured had he stayed out in the open longer.

"Thanks for that, Snowfeather. I suppose this makes up for the time that I had to save you when you got your paw stuck on the train tracks."

Snowfeather smiled. "No problem."

"You've grown so much since then. You started out as a silly apprentice, constantly having to be watched over, and now look at you. A strong, young tom who's watching over me."

Estelle coughed, dissolving the moment. "I don't mean to interrupt, but the tremor is dying down." Hero realized she was right, wondering how he had missed the obvious lessening of the shaking and falling debris. He crawled out from under the monster, making sure that it was safe for the others to come out.

Once they were all back out in the open, Hero flicked his tail. "Come on, let's move." He and the other cats resumed their journey to the North Faction, occasionally skirting around fallen objects and leftover twoleg things. At one point, they heard voices and paw steps approaching, and managed to slip behind a small building before the cats spotted them.

As the approached the Faction camp, a large courtyard with two large buildings on either side came into view.

"Swiftstorm! Jayflight!" Snowfeather cried out happily, and relief filled Hero as he saw the two she-cats standing unharmed at the opposite end of the courtyard. The pair began trotting happily, albeit wearily, towards Hero's group when, suddenly, the ground began to shake.

Hero looked around frantically for cover, but there was none in sight as dust began to fill the air and the tremor got stronger, knocking Snowfeather off his paws. Jayflight and Swiftstorm were still nowhere close to the larger group of cats, the courtyard being larger than it had at first appeared. Just when Hero thought things couldn't get any worse, the loudest sound that he had ever heard filled the air, making him yowl in pain and surprise as the sound split his ears.

With horror, he realized that one of the buildings which flanked the courtyard was falling, falling, and the two she-cats were directly underneath it. In seemingly slow motion, the building fell sideways, crashing into the building parallel to it across the courtyard, and giving the two she-cats just a few extra seconds of time. But it wouldn't be enough.

The last view Hero had of Jayflight, she was grabbing Swiftstorm's scruff and shoving the smaller she-cat forwards, across the courtyard and out from underneath the peril of the fallen building.

The next moment, the building collapsed with a sound like the roar of a great predator, and a monstrous cloud of dust filled the air, blocking all view of Jayflight.

Ey cliffhanger

This was brought to you by le Amazing Annco, hope the last paragraph made you die slightly inside :D

<------ Chapter Twenty-Five ---->

A screech tore Hero's gaze away from the wreckage, the whirling dust a flurry of movement at the edges of his vision. Sharp bits of stone peppered the ground where he had planted his paws, the powder clotting his throat and nose, but he refused to squeeze his eyes shut to block out the debris. He couldn't see where the sound had come from, but his gaze frantically flickered across the landscape, wavering on each flash of shadow until they disintegrated into the surroundings.

"Swiftstorm!"

Snowfeather's shrill cry jolted him awake. Hero pinned his ears to his skull, gagging as he became increasingly aware of the scratching in his throat. Struggling to breathe, he trotted towards the sound, the world spinning before him and erupting in splashes of bright color that didn't seem to fit the dull tones of the world around him.

"Over here!"

That voice was Estelle's, and it was answered by a spluttering gasp so abrupt that it made Hero wince. He identified the form of a large pile of rubble only a few feet away, and seeing as the ground to either side was patterned with shattered glass, he hastily begun to scale the mound of cement and iron.

The dust had begun to settle, and as Hero reached the peak of the obstacle, he could make out the forms of three cats. Snowfeather's coat was so heavy with soot that he appeared to be the same color as Smokewhisker, who stood a pace ahead of him, and then Estelle

a few steps ahead of that.

"Wha-t -" Hero stuttered, his throat dry and sore, continuing towards them cautiously to avoid slipping on the uneven terrain as the wind began to pick up.

Then he came to a very sudden halt.

Whipped away by the breeze, the air had become terrifyingly clear, and as the sight dawned upon him he wished for the dust to rise again. Snowfeather screamed.

Pinned to the wall like a sick depiction of a trophy kill, Swiftstorm teetered on the edge of a narrow ledge, one of her hind paws gripping the surface as the sunlight glared off the iron bar that had been shoved into her skull. A gurgling cry escaped her throat.

"Get her down!" Estelle snapped so venomously that Hero flinched, and he realized that both Snowfeather and Smokewhisker were too shocked to move. At her exclamation, Snowfeather shook himself free of his fear and panic, a deftly began climbing the piled of stone and glass to reach the she-cat. "Hero, Snowfeather, find something soft she can land on. She'll live so long as she's got the ledge under her paws. We're getting her off that spike. *Now*."

Hero, glad to have a directive, dashed off without a moment's hesitation towards a mangled seat cushion he spotted peaking out from beneath the stone. Smokewhisker seemed to have forgotten Jayflight's disappearance temporarily as he too scrambled towards a large slab of foam.

"It's going to be alright," Snowfeather cooed, though his eyes had gone wild with determination, and he slowly inched along the wall towards her. She tried to nod, but only emitted a strangled squeak, and made no effort to try it again as Snowfeather continued to murmur encouragement.

Snowfeather was past the point of terror. He had gone completely numb, and an unsettling calm had descended on him.

Hero's paws shook as he grabbed a hold of the cushion, pulling it

free with strength he didn't know he possessed, and dragged it to the base of the wall where Swiftstorm was pinned. Smokewhisker added the rectangle of foam, Estelle quickly placed a plush material on the pile.

"I'm almost there," Snowfeather swallowed, picking up his pace slightly as a landing pad was put in place. Swiftstorm's blood stained the fabric.

With bated breath, the three cats watched Snowfeather sink into a crouch, his paws finding a hold on the surface though his eyes remained trained on the tortoiseshell she-cat. A few more steps to go. Snowfeather moved forward ever so gingerly, setting his paws on the most stable surface he could grasp, until only a foot of space remained between the two cats.

Estelle exhaled. "Okay, okay. Snowfeather, listen to me very carefully. This won't work unless you do. You're going to need to-"

Without any warning, fractures like lightning bolts shot up the side of the wall, and the stone beneath Snowfeather crumbled away. He leapt backwards, claws digging in to find a foothold as the stone scratched his paw pads raw.

Maybe only a second had passed, but as Hero watched the ledge give way beneath Swiftstorm's leg, time could not have moved more slowly. He couldn't call out, and if he started running he didn't get there fast enough. As the tremors continued to wrack the earth, the sound of shredding flesh and muscle reached his ears, and Swiftstorm slipped so abruptly that her neck snapped backwards against the stone.

Snowfeather moved before he could think, lunging towards her and taking hold of her scruff. He lost his hold on the wall immediately, but held tight to the smaller she-cat, winding himself tightly around her as they tumbled towards the ground.

The two sent up a plume of dust as they landed, and all three cats rushed towards them. Snowfeather was winded, and Swiftstorm was drenched in her own blood, but Estelle had her ear pressed to the she-cat's chest in an instant.

"She's breathing," she muttered, her tone not indicative of relief. "We can thank Snowfeather for that."

Snowfeather struggled to his paws, ignoring Estelle's grimace as she spoke, and leaned over Swiftstorm, gently nudging the she-cat's bloodied cheek.

"Are you there?" He whispered, eyes widening when he received no response. "Swiftstorm, you've got to get up."

Fear had crept into his tone, and Estelle's gaze softened. "Snowfeather, she can't hear you."

"I need you to wake up," he continued, shoving the she-cat to the side when she tried to step between the two, and Snowfeather gave the tortoiseshell a shake. Hero could see he was shaking himself. "Swiftstorm, *please*. I need you to wake up. *Please w-wake up-p*."

His voice cracked on the last two words, and Estelle lifted her paw as if to try to separate the two again, when a spluttering cough interrupted the action.

"Swiftstorm!" Hero gasped, and Estelle pushed past Snowfeather, quickly turning Swiftstorm onto her side.

The coughing continued as Swiftstorm came to, blood dribbling out of the corner of her mouth. Snowfeather was at her side in an instant, murmuring relieved encouragement to her, though he didn't force her to move. He only remained by her side, waiting as she began to regain her strength.

"Are w-w-e s-afe h-here?" she stuttered, and Snowfeather looked to Estelle, who in turn directed her attention to Smokewhisker.

Smokewhisker shook his head, and the faintest trembling in the stones emphasized his point, "Staying here would be a risk. If the tremors don't get to us first, the enemy will be doing a sweep of this area, and who knows what kind of toxins-"

"We can't move," Estelle cut in matter-of-factly, and now Hero's features were creased with a frown.

"We can't stay," he reasoned, but even as he said it, he realized there was no way to move Swiftstorm without injuring her further. He could barely comprehend how she'd managed to stay awake this long at all.

"We have to," Snowfeather murmured, and who Swiftstorm seemed to stare straight through him. Snowfeather smiled at her faintly, though his next statement was directed towards Smokewhisker and Hero. "I'm staying here with her. You should continue towards the bridge, they'll be needing reinforcements."

Snowfeather smiled at him then, and Hero could tell how hard the smaller tom was trying to mask his uneasiness with fake confidence. Hero observed Swiftstorm, and though his eyes were only on her for a moment, he could see everything. The pike had torn through her, the blood draining from the gash in the side of her head massing her fur into ugly clumps. Her stare was hollow, her face expressionless, and she was leaning against Snowfeather so heavily that Hero suspected if the tom were to move she'd cave in on herself like a stack of cards.

The look Estelle shot him confirmed his suspicions. Whether they moved Swiftstorm or not, her chances of surviving were slim. The chances of her staying the same were slimmer.

Hero exhaled. "We should get to the bridge."

"I'm staying too," Smokewhisker swallowed, sounding as pained as Swiftstorm looked. "They'll need help. And protection."

Hero could only expect that from such a loyal cat.

"May StarClan light your path," Estelle murmured to him, rather shortly, indicating that they were pressed for time. Hero wasn't aware that she knew anything of Clan customs. Hero dipped is head to her, and considering reminding her to take care of his cats, but the words didn't escape his mouth.

Instead, swathed in silence, he turned tail and sprinted off across the courtyard, listening to the sound of his friend's voices fade into the white noise.

"Snowfeather, apply pressure here, don't let up unless I explicitly tell you so. Smokewhisker, I'm going to need something to soak up the blood, so snap to it. There's a high likelihood of cerebral hemorrhaging, we'll need something to prevent infection, before it... hold on, no. Snowfeather, stop what you're doing, I need something sharp."

"What for?"

"The eye's useless now."

< ———————— >

Thump.

Hero's pawsteps thrummed against the slick asphalt, and each time they made contact the sound reverberated along his spine and made him clench his teeth. His sides burned with the effort of his constant pace, so he focused on anything he could to distract himself; the delicate, fractured spirals in the cement, the flickering lamps that cast yellowed light into the crevices that had been ripped open by the quake, the moon that sunk lower and lower in the sky, a silver lining at the edges of the stark buildings.

Thump.

That time it was his heart. By the time Hero came to a stop, panting but trying to quiet the noise for fear of being overheard, his heard was racing. He could feel it pulsing in his limbs and behind his eyes, but it had grown from a dull throbbing to a sharp jolt that made him feel jittery, as if the wind might pull him apart.

Foxspring. Annelyse. Bling. Lilypool. Jayflight. Maybe he had even lost Swiftstorm, and she'd died just after he'd left to fight in a war he couldn't prevent. Maybe all of them had been crushed by falling stones, or ripped apart by vicious Faction cats, or swallowed into the earth like-

A metallic clang rang out amongst the stars.

It sounded distant, maybe a couple of blocks away, but it shook Hero of his worries and reminded him of his orientation within the

city. It was too close to be the main battle; still, if he could save even a single cat, it would be worth it. Though his sides heaved, he started off at a trot once again, intent on reaching the conflict as quickly as possible. The faster he ran, the more his ragged breathing tore at his lungs, the more easily the ache would overwhelm the misery that clawed at his heart.

"Oi!" came an exclamation, and as fate would have it, Hero's eyes met with those of a spotted she-cat whose eyes blazed with a wild sort of uncontrollable energy. "Eyes up, Timekeeper!"

It took a split second for Hero to realize that "eyes up" quite literally meant *"eyes up"*.

Craning his neck, he could now see Tags outlined in the moonlight, struggling to avoid the edge of the unstable metal platform where she had locked claws with an enemy cat. Tags moved soundlessly and skillfully, orienting herself so that each move she made kept her from being shoved off the edge, but the battle-scarred grey tom who fought against her seemed to be at no disadvantage.

"I could use a little help here!" Tags snapped, and the tom grunted as she outmaneuvered him for the third time in a row.

Hero narrowed his eyes, trying to pick up any useful information from where he stood, but he couldn't see enough of the outcropping to give Tags any sort of helpful directive. A moment passed. He moved on to the tom.

He zeroed in on a stray piece of leather dangling from a patch of armor on the tom's haunch. "The stitching on his flank guard is-"

Thump.

"...defective."

Hero barely had time to dodge out of the way when the body landed at his paws. He had barely caught the end of the fight, and when he glanced up again, Tags had begun to navigate her way back to solid ground.

Then something rammed into his side.

Hero tripped, his head snapping back as he was flung onto the pavement, clawing at whatever enemy had knocked him onto his back, but they met only with air. Tags raced towards him, but she was quickly hidden by the form of a gruff, long haired brown tom.

"Levi, heel!" Tags snarled, as Hero had begun preparing his counter-attack, "He's one of us."

Levi's lip curled, but he muttered an apology under his breath and stepped off of Hero.

Embarrassed at having been taken off guard, Hero nimbly got to his paws, shaking off some of the dust that clung to his fur. "Charming companion."

Tags didn't respond; her expression had turned to something attentive in nature. Four more cats were approaching, all with varying degrees of injury. "Is the asset safe?" she called out once they were within earshot.

"*Sofi* is perfectly fine," Levi retorted, coming to stand on the other side of Hero.

"Asset?" Hero inquired, blinking at the she-cat, "What's going on here?"

Tags nodded a greeting to the four cats, containing with her own train of thought. "The cream tabby she-cat's Dodge, the darker brown tabby is Rhys, and the grey and white she-cat is Sofi. You've already met Kilter and Levi."

It had taken a moment for Hero to pick out Kilter from the crowd; the tom looked forlorn, his eyes unfocused and his steps uneven. It was the same expression Snowfeather had adopted when he though he had lost Swiftstorm.

"It's nice to meet you all. *What the hell is happening*?" Hero repeated, though Tags looked intent on avoiding his question. "Right, don't tell me then. We've got a battle to be getting to anyway-"

"We're not going to the battle," Tags murmured in exasperation, begrudgingly turning to face Hero. "Well, not the one you were

going to."

Hero cocked his head to the side. "*Were?*"

"We'll tell you on the way there," Tags explained shortly, and began walking away from the group.

"I didn't agree to come," Hero scoffed, his words lost in the silence of the night as one by one, each cat started off after Tags.

"Just go with it," Dodge sighed, nudging his shoulder as she passed, "Resistance is futile."

Sorry about the update gap! I'm going to be doing the next two chapter consecutively, and will be attempting to publish both before the end of the week. As always, tell me how you liked this chapter in the comments!

~Frost

<------ Chapter Twenty-Six --- >

"Sofi's a South Faction cat-"

"-*was* a south Faction cat," Levi corrected, tone challenging.

Tags didn't take the bait. It was clear she'd been trying to avoid an argument with this cat for some time. "Sofi was a South Faction cat an' the daughter of one of Alpha's advisors, so she had a fairly high standing among faction cats. She learned of Alpha's plans a couple months back an' planned to reveal this information to the general public, but the war came on faster than expected, an' some officials had caught wind of her plan, so she figured she had to get out of the South District to avoid execution. Y'know, with the treason n' all," she began explaining as they continued forward at a brisk pace, "Alpha, of course, is the leader-"

"Is the leader of the South District, yes. I'm aware," Hero replied, trying to focus on where he was putting his paws so as to avoid patches of glass or rough stone. He suspected his paw pads had grown even more torn and bloody, but he couldn't summon the courage to stop and examine. He hadn't been able to feel them for a while now, anyway, so it didn't make sense to hold up such an important expedition.

"Not every cat in the South Faction supports what Alpha's doing," Sofi added, her voice quiet as she trotted up beside Hero, "Most of them don't even known. They're just blindly fighting to protect their home, and they believe that following Alpha is the only way to do that. If we can reach camp and tell them what's going on, they'll turn on him. With Alpha gone we can negotiate a ceasefire."

They passed under a flickering street lamp, the last source of dwindling light along that street, and before long they were plunged into darkness. Tags signaled for them to slow to a walk

while she figured out what direction to lead them in, and Sofi and Hero continued walking side by side.

"How do you know this will work?" Hero asked, and Sofi's brown eyes clouded with something that Hero, despite his particular talents, couldn't quite decipher.

"I know where you come from it's all meadows and sunshine, Timekeeper, but the faction cats don't exactly have the same privileges as you Clan cats. You don't have a choice in the life you will lead, it's chosen for you. Kittens are sent out into battle as early as five months of age, since the start of this war we've deployed cats as young as four. The longer this goes on, the more lives are risked," Sofi murmured, and the other cats nodded and grunted in assent. When Sofi spoke next, her voice was nearly a whisper. "Nobody wants a war, Hero. Sometimes they just don't realize it until it's too late."

Tags cut in from of them, and Hero stopped suddenly to avoid being trampled. "We're here," she informed them simply, and Hero squinted to try and figure out what he was supposed to be looking at.

Without warning, lightning sliced across the night sky, swathed in clouds that bore no rain. It illuminated the bleak city with glowing contours and flashes, and for a moment spectacle took Hero's breath away.

Then the moment ended.

The cats stood on a chunk of cement that had risen from the street during the quakes, and Hero had walked up the gradual slope without having noticed. Where the street should have continued there was nothing but empty space, and only a few paces in front of him the cement disappeared into what he estimated was a hundred foot drop.

The cityscape that lay before him was crumbling and decrepit, the skyline melded with the darkness and the stars hidden by vast amounts of cloud. The bridge could clearly be seen from here, the water beneath it choppy and grey, churned into big white whorls by

the wind that whistled past the wires and cords strung between the stone spires that stood atop the bridge. But amidst the chaos and destruction, oblivious to the disaster that threatened to reduce their city to dust, fought hundreds of armor-clad cats. A writhing mass of fur and claws and teeth and stone.

"We should have left this place while we had the chance," Kilter swallowed, fighting to keep the stutter out of his voice, "If it weren't for this war, maybe we could have escaped the earthquake. We could have saved everyone."

"They never would have left the city," Tags sighed resolutely, and Hero wondered why Tags had excluded herself from her judgements about the Faction cats. "But the sooner we get down there, the less blood will have to be shed.

More nods spread among the cats, and Tags veered to the right, having identified a safe path to the battlefield below and ahead of them.

"Woah, woah, wait," Hero interrupting, dashing in front of the spotted she-cat with a frown etched into his features, "You're going down *there*?"

Tags narrowed her eyes. "Sofi knows the enemy, she'll be a helpful asset to infiltrating the enemy camp."

"Sofi does't just know the enemy, she knows the South Faction camp inside and out," Hero pointed out, as the other cats came to a stop before him, forming a half-circle, "Sofi said that the enemy Factions' allegiances are unsteady; if we killed Alpha, the allegiance would break, and we could stop the battle entirely instead of trying to fight our way through. No more North and South Faction cats would have to die."

"They're the *enemy,*" Tags retorted.

"They've got families, just like yours. They're fighting to save themselves and their home, same as us. Why should they have to die for that?"

Another moment passed, and as Tags opened her mouth, the other cats looked up at her expectantly.

"He's right," Dodge agreed, tilting her head slightly.

"There is good in these cats, I promise you," Sofi added.

Tags exhaled, claws flexing and scratching against the concrete.

"Have it your way, Timekeeper."

< ———————— >

Somewhere along their walk, Sofi had taken lead of the group, much to Tags' disgruntlement. The grey and white she-cat expertly picked her way around fallen debris, and upon noticing her talent of avoiding rough patches and sharp object, the other cats began to place their paws wherever she had placed hers as they followed along.

They natural fell into a single file line behind her, which they would have had to do anyway, as Hero soon found the path beneath his paws becoming narrower. As if nothing had changed, Sofi padded gracefully over the top of a fallen arch that was halfway embedded in the pile of fragmented bricks beneath it, and the other cats carefully ascended it after her.

"You seem to know what you're doing," Tags commented, her trademark suspicion lacing each word.

"This is the exact route I left the South Faction camp from," she chirped, hopping off the edge of the arch onto solid ground once again, "I've got near perfect photographic memory, and it seems there haven't been any tremors around here recently, so not much has changed."

The cats accepted this, as they were too physically and mentally exhausted to argue.

Almost half an hour has passed since Hero had lost sight of any sort of familiar territory, meaning they were well into the North District, which lay across the bridge from their destination.

After a few more minutes, Sofi brought them to a halt.

"Here we are," she announced.

Tags flicked her ears. "Where is 'here'?"

Sofi smiled in amusement and nodded towards the gaping hole in the wall to the right of her, half blocked by a fallen beam, and Hero's ears pricked to the faint sound of rushing water.

"This pipe runs across the river underneath the treatment plant's maintenance bridge. I promise, it's completely secure."

Hero half expected Tags to say something about how she would rather not enter a pitch black tunnel leading into enemy territory, but instead she bit her tongue and ducked under the beam without another word.

"It's safe," she verified from the depths of the metal tube, "Smells like dead rats though. Wait, no, that's because there's a dead rat.

Sofi rolled her eyes and swished her tail, gesturing for the others to follow as she followed after tags. Hero raised a paw a fraction of an inch, meaning to enter behind Sofi, when Levi shot him a warning glare. Seeming not to notice their companion's hostility, Rhys and Dodge went first, Dodge ushering Kilter along ahead of her. Hero entered last.

The tunnel was pitch black and the freezing metal seemed to sap the warmth from all over Hero's body, making him to cold even to shiver in protest. The spongey material made Hero wince every time it squelched beneath his paws or dripped onto his pelt, but he was glad for the relief it provided from the bitingly frigid metal.

No one spoke as they walked, partly because the sound could travel and alert someone at the other end of the pipe, and partly because there wasn't much to talk about. So instead Hero listened to the distant roar of the river and ringing that reverberated around the enclosure whenever a cat's claws clicked against the bare metal.

Though it was still dark outside, the cats had to blink a few time to adjust their eyes to the light when they emerged from the tunnel.

They shared weary glances. "Right," Tags muttered, inhaling and using her foreleg to scrape off some moss behind her ear, "Now we just-"

"Heads up!"

Hero was suddenly torn from the peaceful silence, both literally and figuratively, as something large and heavy slammed into him. He whipped around to see Levi wrestle his attacker to the ground and dispatch him with terrifying swiftness, baring his teeth ferociously before sinking them into the leg of a brown tabby she cat a second later, dragging her off of Rhys's back.

Sofi had recoiled from an abrupt noise and was standing against the wall, and Levi looked up to find the source of the sound, when the she-cat he'd managed to pin to the stone thrust her powerful hind legs into his stomach and scrambled out from under him.

The ambush had lasted less than a minute, and had been performed by only three cats - he suspected all of them were on guard duty near the tunnel and had attacked instead of going for help.

"I have to go after her," Levi barked, having regained his breath, then turned and dashed off in the same directing the tabby she-cat had gone without waiting for an approval.

"You're not going to stop him?" Hero remarked, but Tags had followed Levi's example and started off in the opposite direction.

"He knows what he's doing. They know we're here now, but if he catches up to the she-cat we can keep Sofi's presence a secret," she elaborated.

Hero stared down at the body of a cat who had attacked Kilter during the ambush, which the other cats pointedly avoided looking at as they doggedly continued to follow after Tags.

It was a small black tom cat, no more than four moons old. Hero paused to close the tom's eyelids over his bright yellow eyes.

Their pace quickened and Hero's eyes trained on the sky, where the moon was slowly sinking lower in the sky. It couldn't be more than

two hours until dawn, but now it felt that time was moving in slow motion. Barely two minutes passed before the came face to face with another peril.

"On your right!" Dodge cried out, and Hero rolled to the side just as the enemy cat's blade swung above his head, and his heart fluttered anxiously.

Another swing, another miss. Dodge was busy try to defend Kilter, whose eyes only grew wider with each blow that the enemy patrol issued.

Another strike, and this time the cat's blade wedged itself between two stones. Hero slashed at the opposed appendage, and the cat yanked its foreleg back with a yowl. It backed away and turned to flee without another thought, but Hero didn't give chase.

Beat.

"What, you're just letting 'im go?" Tags scoffed.

Hero's nose twitched. "They know we're here."

The message rang true with the other cats, and when they were met with yet another small patrol, every cat was sent howling back to their camp completely intact.

They were slowly rising higher, and Hero wasn't completely sure what kind of structure they were mounting. It didn't seem like anything that belonged in a city, though the occasional stained glass window reminded him of the East Faction camp. It was by one of these large windows that the group stopped to rest, each observing the wounds they had suffered, though luckily none too bad. Hero couldn't stand still for long, the silence gave him time to think, and at the moment he didn't want to remember anything that had happened that night. He didn't want to think about Swiftstorm or Lilypool or whether Whiteshadow was still alive. He just wanted to curl up in a ball and wait until everything was better.

"What the *hell* is that?" Dodge exclaimed, staring out the colorfully distorted panel.

"I've got no idea," Rhys replied, though he quickly took an interest in what the she-cat was looking at, as did Hero, who was eager to have something to take his mind off of him friends.

He could clearly see how close to camp they were now; a vast courtyard stretched out in front of them, though it was far below wherever they were now resting, which a partially enclose segment of an almost medieval-looking wall. Situated on top of a particularly high building about a quarter of the way around the courtyard, and seemingly attached to the same wall they were traveling along, was an enormous machine.

"That thing's *huge*," Dodge gasped, and Hero moved to the side to make room for Tags, Kilter, and Sofi, whose attention Dodge had drawn.

"Huge is an understatement," Rhys countered, pressing his face against the glass so intently that Hero thought he might fall through, "That thing could house an entirely family of cars."

Before anyone had the chance to guess as to what it might be, the air was filled with a whirring noise, and circuit-like patterns lit up near the center of the machine. The brief orange glow made it a bit easier to see the machine itself, which was a contraption made of metal compartments and tubing and archaic looking gears, but the wonderment was short-lived.

A projectile erupted from the mouth of the machine, soaring in across the courtyard and towards the river beyond the walls, trailed by opalescent fire. Once it reached the height of its arc, the orb exploded into a dozen blazing fragments that fell towards the ground with surprising speed, disrupting the original arc. The cats couldn't hear the resulting screeches, but they winced as several structures on the battlefield went up in flame.

"They can't..." Dodge stepped away from the windowsill, green eyes mirroring the bright orange spires that rose from the other side of the bridge, "They can't just *do* that."

Tags grimaced. "They can."

"The faster we get to Alpha, the faster we can deactivate whatever that thing is," Sofi encouraged, looking equally perplexed and determined. She obviously hadn't know about the weapon. Exactly how much was the South Faction hiding form their cats?

"It'll be too late," Dodge swallowed shakily, ears pinned to her head.

Beat.

"Wait," Rhys piped up, sidling up beside the she-cat in an attempt to calm her trembling, "Wait. We're not giving up that easily. We can disable it."

"We can?" Dodge asked incredulously.

"You sure about this?" Tags inquired skeptically, narrowing her eyes at Rhys, who averted his gaze.

"I've worked with dozens of machines, why should this one be any different?" he reasoned, gently nudging her shoulder in the same way Hero realized Lilypool had used to. Rhys turned to Tags. "So we split up. You, Hero, Sofi and Kilter find Alpha, Dodge and I will take out the machine and rendezvous with Levi. Easy-peasy, right?"

Tags motioned towards Hero, and Hero smiled at Rhys, who quickly returned the gesture. "Easy-peasy," Hero agreed.

The group fell quiet again as they trudged away from the glass windows, where Sofi had sent Rhys and Dodge down another narrow path leading in the direction of the machine. Hero only hoped that they could stop it. Hope was all they had left.

"It's getting darker," Kilter mumbled, and Hero noticed that they had entered a stone corridor. His spine prickled, and he saw Sofi tense, though she continued to lead them down the corridor with a confident stride.

No one replied.

Beat.

"Wait," Tags commanded, padding in front of Sofi once the gray and

white she-cat came to a stop.

Sofi's tail swished uncertainly. "Something wrong?"

"Isn't it always," Hero muttered, mostly to himself.

"Quiet down, someone's coming," Tags snapped, her large ears swiveling towards the darkness ahead of him. It was a few more seconds before Hero began to hear the sound as well; a sort of panting, heaving, dragging noise that made his bones ache. He opened his mouth to comment, but Tags didn't give him a chance. "No armor. Either it's not a cat, or it's not an enemy."

Sofi stepped backwards until her fur brushed the wall, eyes narrowing to apprehensive slits.

The ragging breathing only grew louder, accompanied by an unsteady, loping gait. "Please..." the word echoes down the hall, the fur on the back of Hero's neck began to stand up. "You'hv got t o h-help m-e."

A brown and white tom limped out of the shadows, stepping into a shaft of moonlight that had escaped the cover of clouds. He stood, quivering, and sodden with blood. His glassy eyes flicked over each cat.

Beat.

"Who are you?" Tags growled, but her voice wavered when the tom's fearful eyes landed on hers.

"He's hurt," Kilter pleaded, sympathy lacing his words.

His torn tail dropped behind him as he wearily stepped towards her. "P-please, you have t-o-"

"Get back," Tags hissed, and he stopped short. Tags and Sofi hung back behind her, exchanging wary glances. Both cats had unsheathed their claws. "Don't come any closer."

The tom hadn't fully emerged from the shadows, and the dark clung to his form. "We can't just leave him there!" Kilter tried.

"Kilter," Tags warned.

"No!" he spat, so audibly that Tags nearly jumped. Hero looked taken aback. "No! I'm not letting anyone else die for this war, not while I can do something about it. This is *sick*."

Kilter tore past Tags, who had stepped in front of him in attempt to block him from the tom, who had begun to crumble under his own weight. Hero and Sofi were too far back to reach him, and for a split second, as Kilter rushed to the tom's side, Hero felt as if the fate of the world hung in the balance.

Beat.

A sharp metal *twang* reverberated in Hero's ears, a flash of metallic silver flew past before the moon was swallowed by the storm outside and the light disappeared. While his eyes acclimated to the new darkness, Tags raced past him, with Sofi running at her heels, determination contorting what little he could see of their faces.

There was a yelp. Not a loud noise, but more of a drowning, dying noise, and then it ceased altogether and there was a thump. Have few other senses to go on, Hero followed the sound. His paws met with something soft, and then almost immediately after, something warm and viscous.

The swirling clouds gave way to the moon once again, watery light struck the scene inside the hall. Lightning flashed, and Kilter's eyes glinted. The tom lay, collapsed at Hero's paws, with blood streaming out of the corner of his mouth and a serrated metal projectile protruding from his chest.

Beat.

There were enemy cats to Hero's right, no more than five. Sofi and Tags had nearly incapacitated all of them in a matter of moments, sending a few screeching in the direction from which they had come.

Hero felt like he was the one dying. Kilter's chest rose, but he emitted no more than a gentle sigh. His eyes remained wide, and

when he suddenly jerked, the two she-cats had arrived at his side.

"What do we do?!" Sofi exclaimed, fur bristling.

Tags shook her head, wordless.

Kilter blinked, struggling to make any sort of noise. "I don't want to go," he whispered.

Beat.

"You don't have to go," Hero assured him, relieved that he was speaking, thought the relief was short lived.

"I don't want to go," Kilter stared past them, where the ceiling gave way to elaborate stained glass murals. "Please, p-please don't make me go, not y-yet."

Beat.

Hero swallowed. "Just... just calm down. You're not going anywhere."

"I want to stay."

"You can stay for as long as you'd like."

Beat.

"Kilter," Tags cooed, surprisingly gentle as she bent over to press her face to the tom's cheek. He turned his head ever so slightly. "Kilter, it's alright. You're going to see her again. You're going to go see your mate."

Beat.

"No he isn't," Hero insisted, nudging Kilter's side, "You're staying with us. You're going to be alright, I promise. I *promise*."

Silence.

Kilter smiled faintly. "I miss her."

His chest stilled.

Hero stepped backwards.

Blood stained Sofi's white forelegs, as she's been trying to cover the projectile wound in hopes of preventing the blood loss. Carefully, she removed her paws, placing them back on the stone. Rivulets of blood flowed through the fractures in the rock, but Hero didn't bother to step back once they reached him. He lifted his head, gazing into the depths of the corridor.

"Hero?" Sofi murmured softly as he stood up, stepping around Tags with his eyes trained on the darkness ahead. "What are you doing?"

"Deciding how much I'm willing to put up with," Hero responded, and without elaborating, vanished into the shadows.

Here's an extra long chapter with extra character death for you guys! Sorry about jumping around characters so much, but you'll get to see some of the old ones again, I promise.

~Frost

<------ Chapter Twenty-Seven ------>

The wind carried smog from the smokestacks that stood out against the city's skyline, causing the breeze to feel strangely warm against his fur. The smoke itself didn't bother him anymore, though truthfully, it never had.

Since the day he woke up in the workshop, went his mind became alight with fleeting thoughts and unimaginable comprehension, he'd known he was going to die young.

So as Hero stepped out onto the rooftop, it was clear he'd lost all sense of danger, and most of his grip on reality. The shadows flitted around his paws, masking him from the sliver of moon that was washed over by clouds at a constantly fluctuating pace. Silhouetted on the edge of the roof stood a wiry brown tom, fur ticked with darker hues and his long tail trailing behind him. He wasn't particularly large, but intimidating all the same. As he tilted his head to observe the battle scene miles away, dotted with ever-burning fires, the light caught his strikingly elegant features and unnervingly bright amber eyes. Unmistakably pure-bred, no matter what angle you looked at him from.

Two muscular toms were stationed on either side of him, but their gazes wandered about the rooftop from time to time, on high alert for any enemy cat who managed to circumvent their defenses. A third she-cat patrolled the edge of the rooftop, but her fur prickled with agitation, and she seemed more focused on staring down at the ground between her paws as she walked. With a huff, she turned, heading back towards the edge of the roof, where Alpha still sat.

"You're not safe here, sir," she growled, and judging by her tone, it was not the first time this had been conveyed to the leader. "A patrol reported several cats in the east wing corridor, and out of the estimated six who breached our defenses, only one has been

confirmed dead."

Hero couldn't see the leader's smirk, but his snort of contempt was easily audible. "Sunshine's errand boy was with them, no doubt?"

"The Timekeeper?"

Hero's pupils shrank to slits.

"Is that what he's calling himself?" Alpha chuckled, gaze still fixed on the scene ahead of him, "That little band of Faction misfits won't make it out of the corridor in once piece, I guarantee you that. And if they do, I'll kill them myself."

Hero's paw rested on a small metal contraption, and as the she-cat begrudgingly returned to her pacing, he managed slip it over one shoulder. Metal rungs held it tight to his shoulder blade, though he hadn't bothered to attach the straps that were clearly meant to fasten across his chest. With a click, something slipped down over one of his eyes; another metal piece with a lens, inscribed with a small cross-like marking.

The crossbow-esque weapon had been dropped in the corridor where Kilter was killed, and the missing projectile was undoubtedly the one that had sealed the tom's fate.

Five remained.

With movements that echoed the she-cat's like a shadow, Hero padded alongside the wall, weighed down by the weapon, though his paws met the stone soundlessly. His eyes never left the she-cat's form - battle scarred, though her fur held a lustrous sheen. She came to a gradual halt near the edge of the roof, whiskers twitching in irritation, as Hero silently drew a glinting steel shaft from the cuff he'd exchanged his previous blade for.

"I'm never gonna get anywhere with this job," the she-cat muttered, scuffing the ground with her paw, "That's what I get for leaving home."

The shaft slid into place with a sharp *click*, flashing so brightly that the she-cat winced when it briefly flickered across her ice-blue eyes,

and the droplets of blood torn from her neck were whipped away by the wind moments before she fell into the river several stories below. Hero fired another shot before one of Alpha's guards had time to react to the incident, and the other, a bulky brown tom, started towards him just as he loaded the next.

"Traitorous bottom-feeding scum," the tom spat, and the projectile pierced his exposed chest, turning the last word to a spluttering cry.

Never losing his composure, Alpha turned to face him, jaw briefly clenched in dissatisfaction before he adopted a flickering grin. "So you're him, then?" he asked tauntingly, completely unfazed as Hero began to advance, "I have to admit, I was expecting someone a bit more... *impressive*."

Another projectile loaded, Hero's face contorted with anger. "Impressive?" He snapped, the metal pieces of the contraption clinking together as he continued forward, "You've killed hundreds of innocent cats, chased them from their homes and threatened their families just because they're *not like you*. You've upset the peace that our leaders put into place so long ago, turned the entire city against itself, provoked a full blown war that's threatening to wipe the entire population. Not just kittypets and Clan cats, *everyone*. I allied with my greatest enemy. I brought the Clans together. I sealed an ancient call-to-arms agreement with the founder of my Clan to keep you from power, because she believed in the equality of every cat who *has* lived and will *ever* live in this city. You deem that *unimpressive*?"

Hero was panting by the end of his rant, but Alpha only smiled wider, a knowing glint in his eyes that struck Hero with an apprehensive sickness. "That's what he told you?" Alpha snorted, ears pinned back as he emitted a sound that sounded more like a choke than a laugh, "That she was some savior of the Clans? Some enforcer of the peace?"

Hero had halted now, his weapon raised and within range to fire. "Why don't you stop talking so I can kill you faster?"

Instead of heeding the warning, the leader only continued to talk, expression unchangingly smug. "Ash wasn't a hero. She was an

outcast to the point that she was barely a part of her own *clan*. So one day she snapped, waltzed into the city, and made a deal with the first cat she could find who held a position of power," he began, sneering as Hero's anger began melting into stubborn disbelief, though he didn't attempt to interrupt, "She decided to stage an ambush. The Factions would attack the Clan cats, Ash would get to play hero, even if it meant countless casualties. She led most of the cats to safety, fended off the attackers, founded a Clan, and for the first time her pathetic life was worth something."

"You're lying," Hero growled, unconvinced.

Alpha continued without missing a beat. "In return, she became the Factions' personal source of information, gathering information from any of the non-Clan cats who joined AshClan and relaying it to whichever Faction could offer her the most in return, regardless of the resulting collateral damage. Kittypet homes and loner camps were discovered and destroyed, along with their inhabitants, thanks to locations she provided. She would promise to return the cats' families, when in reality she was sacrificing them all in an attempt to make herself more powerful."

Hero was trembling now. "Shut up," he hissed, tension clear in his voice, "*Shut up*."

"And it worked. She didn't care about anything but the strength of her own clan, and from her perspective, she had nothing to lose and everything to gain. When that wasn't enough to satisfy her need for control, she turned her sights on the city itself. Eventually, she made a faux call-to-arms agreement with the leader of the city's main Faction to gain his trust, and killed him the moment she had the chance. She vowed to wipe the city of its filth, its *impurities*, and broke away to become the original founder of the South Faction."

"Y-you're..." Hero stuttered, but couldn't find the words. His paws were glued to the cement, mind whirling with the realization of betrayal, unsure of what emotion he felt beneath a mask of disbelief. Somehow, Alpha's words had broken him, and he couldn't find any sort of plausible reaction, other that to whimper out a final word. "*Lying*."

But it all made sense.

"Hero!" Came a call from behind him, and Alpha raised his head to spot a large, black tom padding across the rooftop at a hurried pace. "Don't listen to him, you know he isn't telling the truth."

Hero only had to angle his head slightly to see Sunshine and Thug had somehow caught up to him, both showing marks of battle, though Thug's wounds were much more prominent. "There's no reason to believe him," Thug added, faithful as always to the words of his leader, but stopped almost immediately afterwards to lift his paw. It was twisted at an odd angle, and Hero was surprised he had made it this far from the battle field.

Sunshine, however, did not even glance back as he approached Alpha, brow furrowed. "Is this your plan, you absolute dullard? Convince one of our most noble warriors that the entire cause he's fighting for is some kind of... some kind of corrupt plot? If you think even for one second that he's going to believe you, you're even denser than I thought."

Only a few feet from Alpha now, Sunshine looked over at Hero for confirmation, relaxing the snarl he had been directing at Alpha, who remained unmoving in the face of Hero's weapon. "How did you get up here so fast?"

Sunshine's frown deepened. "What?"

"It took us hours to find our way here, and we were with a cat who knew the territory inside and out," Hero murmured, turning now to address Thug, "You arrived just in time to stop Alpha from incriminating you."

"I... he told me to follow him here. He knew where to go." Gradually, Thug's eyes clouded with doubt, and he looked at the ground for a moment before looking back at Hero, "He told me to hang back in case of an attack. How *did* you know how to get here?"

Sunshine's gaze was cold and hard, but he said nothing when Hero moved to the side slightly, now aiming the crossbow at him. "He followed us."

Sunshine scoffed, now seemingly aware that he had put himself in the line of fire. "Are you accusing me of-"

"Starting a war over a fake document? Sacrificing hundreds of cats to fulfill your own psychotic plans? Sending my friends and I up here to die?" Hero snarled, each word louder than the previous, "*Take your pick*."

Alpha not had moved, but by now, his smug grin had all but vanished. Hero remained planted in front of the two leaders, aiming the weapon at Alpha once again. "And because of you, I've lost everyone I love. It's the blood of my friends that's been spilled in this city, it was your command that sent four month old kittens to fight in a war, it was your words that provoked groups of cats to turn on each other and slaughter each other for an empty cause."

Neither cat spoke to defend themselves, and Sunshine stared desperately at Thug, whose confusion had turned to hostility. "Are you just going to stand there and let him make threats?"

Thug swallowed, tail lashing in irritation. "I suppose so."

"As I see it, you're both murderous, manipulative lowlifes. So the question is, which one of you do I kill?"

There was another period of silence as the two leaders, now with no other option, struggled to decide their next plan of action.

"Kill him," Alpha blurted.

Sunshine whipped around to face him. "*What*?"

"He got you involved in the war. None of this would have happening if you hadn't decided to fight for him," Alpha reasoned refusing to make eye contact with the other tom as he did so.

"We wouldn't have even *had* a war if you had just stayed in your own *damn territory*."

"He manipulated you into risking your own life! Kill him, Hero, I swear I'll repay you. "

"He sent cats to hunt down and murder your friends."

"You used them as bait."

"You can't seriously believe he's going to repay you."

Hero didn't speak a word as the two toms argued, each trying to pin the blame on the other and barely managing to stop themselves from going at each other's throats. He took a leisurely step forward, laughing under his breath, and the two toms shared a last glower before redirecting their attention. "So, both of you think that the other is more deserving of death," he concluded, then raising his voice, "Well, I have good news for the two of you. You're both going to get what you want."

Another pause, and Hero's mouth twitched, the ghost of a malevolent smile. "I've still got two projectiles left."

Sunshine's scowl vanished in an instant, as if he was only know registering the fact that he was in legitimate danger. "You won't," he challenged, but it was clear he didn't believe that anymore.

"I won't kill you both?" Hero questioned, claws flexing with impatience as he laughed quietly, "I have every reason to."

As the words left Hero's mouth, he knew they were true. Maybe more so than anything else that had been said on the roof that night. So he stood, with his two greatest enemies completely at his mercy, and with a weapon pointed at their heads. Both responsible for so much death and destruction, both had made it their goal to see him dead, both would have made the shot in a heartbeat if the had been the one holding the crossbow.

But Hero didn't.

Because on the opposite side of the roof, where an elevated metal pathway connected the next this building to the next one over, a cat had appeared. A smallish, toirtoiseshell-and-white cat, with half of her face and most of her foreleg swathed in bandages. Then a second, moving to help support the first, and a grey tabby and a large grey tom. Tags was the last to reach the bridge, and she stood

where Lilypool might have.

They were all there; Swiftstorm, Snowfeather, Jayflight, Smokewhisker, they were all safe, and they were all watching him expectantly.

So Hero didn't shoot.

Instead, he sighed and lowered the weapon. "But if I killed you, I would be no better than you are. We could walk away. No one would have to get hurt," he exhaled, glancing up at the bridge again before he began waling forward, between the two toms. Once he reached the edge of the roof, he ducked out of the straps that bound the weapon to his body, and tossed it on the ground. He looked at each one in turn, then slowly began walking away from them and towards the bridge.

Without a moment's hesitation, the two toms dove for the crossbow, claws unsheathing as they struggled to grasp the weapon that could seal their enemy's fate. They wrestled over it, intent on gaining to upper hand, until the endeavor brought them too close to the edge of the roof. They lost traction, and with a partially muffled screech, stumbled over the side of the roof and towards the raging water below. The crossbow fell behind them.

It was over in an instant, and then the sound of rushing water flooded his senses.

Long time no update sorry my friends

~Frost

<------ Chapter Twenty-Eight ------>

They stood there in silence for a moment. Nothing could be heard except the sound of rushing water and their own heavy breathing.

Then, suddenly, they engulfed him with yowls of happiness.

"You did it, Hero! You did it!"

He felt his whiskers twitch into a hesitant look of happiness, seeing the pride evident on every one of their faces. He'd done it. He really had.

He was a Hero.

He let them congratulate him for a few more minutes before deciding enough was enough and shoved them away gently. Now he looked at them with excitement. "What about you? What happened?"

Swiftstorm dipped her head weakly. "Well, I lived," she mewed rather unnecessarily. "Estelle is an excellent healer." She glanced down at her foreleg. "Though she used an awful lot of bandages."

Hero nodded. "I can see that," he mewed, almost instantly regretting the sarcastic tone in which he'd spoken.

Swiftstorm didn't mind, of course.

"And you guys?" asked Hero, gesturing to Jayflight. "I thought you'd been..." His voice trailed off.

He'd thought she was dead.

Jayflight shrugged. "I made it out."

Well, that's obvious. Hero bit back the sarcastic comment and waited for her to elaborate. She didn't speak. "Well, that's good." *Details, please?*

"And she hardly had a scratch!" broke in Smokewhisker. "I was so relieved..."

Huh.

Hero glanced at Jayflight curiously again before deciding that she was just a bit rattled by the near-death experience.

Still, he couldn't help but wonder if it had been something more...

"Wait," mewed Hero suddenly. "Where's Estelle?" The black-and-white she-cat was nowhere to be seen, which struck him as a bit odd. He didn't think her the type to abandon someone in pain.

Snowfeather and Swiftstorm exchanged glances. "I don't know," admitted Swiftstorm. "Last I saw, she was going to try and help some others out of this place." She ducked her head, muffling a cry of pain when it pulled something. "We...ah, left to got find you after that."

Hero considered that for a moment before nodding his head. "Well, that does sound like a good idea." Seeing the others' confused looks, he added: "To help the others." He gestured with his tail to the land below, and was greeted with nods.

"Yeah, let's get off this roof," shivered Snowfeather. He turned to Swiftstorm, and Hero could just hear him mutter: "I don't think I'm ever going to like heights again."

He couldn't blame him.

He led the way down the stairs. In the initial confusion, Hero couldn't even remember how he'd gotten here, but he noted with worry that the stairs were awfully steep.

Not great for a cat with half their body wrapped in bandages.

Swiftstorm waved him ahead feebly. "I'm fine."

"You're *not* fine," insisted Snowfeather. "Here, I'll help you." He pushed on her side sharply, and Smokewhisker quickly took the other.

They were doing quite well until the whole building suddenly shook.

With a cry, Hero oppled over and only just managed not to fall down the rest of the stairs. Smokewhisker had somehow managed to say immobile *and* be an effective barrier against Swiftstorm and Snowfeather's weights.

Jayflight wasn't quite as lucky, slipping down a step or two before lashing her tail around a railing pole.

Hero winced. That looked painful.

"Everyone alright?" he called. He might have seen them fall, but it never hurt to make sure.

"We're fine," mewed Swiftstorm.

"Me too," called Jayflight, uncurling her tail from the bar. "Though my tail feels like it was run over by a monster." She tried to flex it and winced.

"Ok," Hero replied. "Let's just be super careful now."

Thankfully, they made it down the rest of the stairs without any more tremors, and Hero took a deep breath and exited the doorway.

Waiting there, Hero found Tags, who looked suitably relieved to see him there.

She opened her mouth as if to cry in excitement, then seemed to remember herself and simply greeted him with a dip of her head. "So, you survived, Timekeeper."

"Indeed." He paused. "So, the rest of--"

Hero's statement was broken as the ground suddenly trembled violently. Instinctively rolling to the ground, he shivered as a slab of

a *something* landed with a *crash* beside him.

He looked at it and shuddered.

The object had managed to crack the concrete.

That would not have been good for my health.

"Hero? Hero? You alright?"

Hero spat out a clod of dust. "Yeah, I'm fine," he mewed, shakily getting to his feet.

"Thank StarClan!" cried Snowfeather. "We don't need to lose another....cat...." His voice trailed off awkwardly.

No one wanted to think about Lilypool.

A silence followed, and Hero was, of couse, smothered with thoughts of Lilypool-- thoughts of the beautiful she-cat who'd died before him. It was typical, of course. As soon as you tried not to think of something, it was the first thing on your thoughts.

It always happened to the things you really didn't want to think about, too

Lilypool's death was definitely not something he wanted to think about.

He swallowed hard and forced himself to look at Tags. "We're going to get more cats out of this..." He gestured with his tail. "This...hell."

It seemed an appropriate word to use, now. He was acutely aware of the smoke rising from many of the buildings and chocking his senses, and the tumbling streets and buildings were demons in their own right.

Demons of fire and stone and metal.

Metal...the heat of the fires suddenly him. Hero sliced off his armor quickly, letting the suddenly red-hot piece of metal clatter loudly on the ground. He winced as the cats behind him did the same, the

rattling, clanging noise sending an instant message to his brain.

The fire, the weapons...

They needed to get out of here.

But all those cats...

Hero's fur stood on end when he heard a long screech of pain somewhere to his right. For a moment, he could have sworn it was someone he knew, but then he dismissed it.

It's probably not.

Probably.

In fact, the most likely chance was that it was an enemy cat.

But enemy or not, no cat deserved to die.

Not after all the death already. Not after Hero'd seen why it had all happened, how stupid it'd all been.

Another screech of pain.

They needed to help them.

Tags seemed to come to the same conclusion at almost the same instant, nodding briskly. "There's been a lot of death today," she mewed, spinning and almost running to the chaos. "No need to make it any more."

And that's too true, thought Hero grimly as they passed a charred body. He heard someone gasp behind him, and he winced internally. *There's so much death...and for what?*

Two greedy, vengeful pieces of garbage that didn't deserve to be called cats.

Didn't was the key word, however. *Didn't.* Past tense. They were dead.

They were *dead.*

And Hero had, albeit indirectly, caused it.

He wasn't really sure what to think of it at the moment, as he struggled to stay on his feet and find survivors in this place he'd once called home. He was too wrapped up in his grief for all those that had died and too worried about the ones living to sit back and ponder his feelings.

Perhaps that was a good thing.

Hero felt his consciousness suddenly start to slip. How long had it been since he'd slept? It felt like ages.

A dull pain shot through his foreleg, and he looked down to see a wound he didn't remember having.

Had he gotten it on the stairs? He shrugged the matter off.

He was too tired to care, anyway.

The blood loss probably wasn't helping.

Now Hero was just walking behind his companions, no longer taking the initiative. Jayflight, of course, looked delighted to leave, and he wondered curiously why he didn't let her to it more often.

Well, she's not from here, for starters, he snorted. *She'd walk us in circles*

Of course, technically, she was just following Tags.

And he was content to leave the path-finding to Tags.

Even though they hadn't been the best of friends in the past...

That *was* Tags, right? His eyesight didn't seem to be quite right...he blinked twice. Of course it was.

The sudden muttering of voices told him that they'd joined up with the main group.

Tags leapt up on some sort of ledge and was addressing all the cats,

ordering them to evacuate the City. But Hero's thoughts were distant, and his sense of purpose was slowly slipping away.

Nevertheless, Hero felt himself nodding in agreement and mew assent to the suggestions, and heard his companions do the same.

"We're going to split up..." came Tags' next order, and Hero turned and complied, vaguely registering the fact that she sounded terrified.

Not that he blamed her. They were walking right into the fire.

A fire set by the cat they were trying to save

Snowfeather's anxious mew cut through Hero's thoughts and stopped him in his tracks. "Swiftstorm! No, you're injured! You need to get out..."

Swiftstrom had been following him?

Sure, she might have been quiet, compared to her Clanmates...but still.

He was slipping.

Her couldn't deny it anymore. He was desperately, exhaustively tired.

Hero could hear Swiftstorm protest, snapping him out of his near-sleep for a moment, them he lapsed back into just thinking and walking.

Poor Swiftstorm.

She'd need time to heal, undoubtedly, but Hero couldn't help admiring Estelle's work...

Estelle.

Where was she?

Hero was shocked to find distant he'd gotten. He hadn't gotten this

tired in a long, long time. Normally, if he were tired, he'd just sleep. Problem solved.

But Estelle!

He needed to find her.

Hero stumbled forward with a new source of determination. *Swiftstorm said that she was heading back to the City to help more cats! I've* got *to find her!*

He was practically running now, his vision and mind clear again now that he had a goal. Still, he knew that that would fade quickly into fatigue.

I can't *let that happen!*

Hero ran on, stumbling only twice when a tremor shivered the ground underneath his paws-- enough to throw him off balance, but not enough to knock any other building to the ground.

And thank the stars for that, he thought as he pushed himself off the ground, before sighing and plopping back down as another tremor shook the earth.

He sat for a moment, regaining his breath. Glancing around, he wondered if his quarry was anywhere near. "Estelle? Estelle?" called Hero.

Nothing.

Suddenly, Hero felt very, very tired. The tang of blood reached his nose, and he turned to his foreleg to see it bleeding profusely. He must've scraped it after he fell over.

Hmm, that's not good, was his only thought before his vision began to slip and he heard a frightened voice above him.

"Hero! Hero! Wake up!"

"Whatever for?" he tried to ask, but only managed the "what" before he felt a paw slam across his face.

"OW!" The cat's claws had been unsheathed, leaving small nicks across his face. They were burning in pain now. Burning away the tiredness. "What was that for?"

"Up! UP!"

Hero complied and stumbled to his feet, scowling at the figure in front of him. "What is it? I'm just...so...tired..."

He started to slump again, but the cat caught him. "Hero! You've got to stay awake! At least until we can find a healer."

Healer...Estelle... "ESTELLE!" Hero was up on his feet again, wincing as his right foreleg almost gave out under him. The other cat was instantly at his side, supporting him.

"Woah, steady there, Hero."

With his newfound clarity of thought, Hero finally recognized the cat as Jayflight. "Jayflight?" She was definitely the last cat he'd thought would find him.

Jayflight nodded. "Yeah, it's me."

"Thanks for finding me."

She nodded once.

Hero wanted to say more, to explain his gratitude, but all he could say was, "I would've died without you."

She nodded again. "I know."

The next question he asked was sudden, out of the blue. He blamed it on the blood loss. "How'd you survive that wall?"

Jayflight stiffened. "Just lucky, I suppose. Now, where were those medicines Estelle gave me earlier...?" She patted the ground around her quickly before finding some small round objects. "Ah, here we are. Should keep you awake a little longer," Jayflight mewed as she shoved them into Hero's mouth.

"Thanks," Hero mewed. He paused. "Wait, Estelle?"

"Missing."

Hero felt a shaft of disappointment cut through his belly.

"Any news?" Any *good* news?

After all, he'd barely heard anything Tags had said at that meeting. There must have been something he'd missed.

Something that wasn't just plain discouraging and depressing.

Jayflight shrugged. "Not much, I'm afraid. Sofi is safe, but Levi is MIA." She paused. "A lot of others too."

"Oh," was all Hero could manage. How many friends would die in this battle?

"But look on the bright side," Jayflight mewed. She sounded like she was trying to convince herself. "We're alive."

She didn't mention that so many were dead-- Bling, Lilypool, Foxspring... She didn't have too.

He knew. He remembered.

But *they* were alive.

And perhaps she's right. I suppose that's something to be thankful of.

written by Ember

<------ Chapter Twenty-Nine ------>

They trudged up to the plains in a sort of dull grief and shock.

Hero turned to check on his companion, to reassure himself that she hadn't been lost another by a stray rock or bout of flame without their noticing. But no, Jayflight still stood strong and unharmed, her posture strong but bent over with an invisible weight.

He knew what it was-- the grief of their dead friends, the worry that more had been lost in the chaos.

The wound on his foreleg throbbed violently again, and he winced, sinking to the ground with a groan of pain. It seemed to pulse with a white-hot fire, scalding his body with pain and heat. He wondered vaguely if it was infected already. "Can we...stop?" he choked out.

Jayflight shook her head desperately. "No, no. We're almost there. Just to the top of the hill...then you can get a healer, Hero. And we can see the others..."

Hero nodded and forced himself to his paws again, only to have his leg buckle almost instantly. He toppled into Jayflight, who pushed against him firmly. "Please..." he mewed. The fire had risen so hot he was surprised flames weren't leaping off his fur.

Jayflight shook her head again. "No! We have to get up there!" She gritted her teeth. "We are getting you to the top of the hill," she hissed out.

Hero shuddered but pushed hard against the she-cat has she helped him up the hill, pain shooting through his body with every step. *I have to do this. I must be strong...*

The air was suddenly thick with the scent of blood as the smoke from the City faded, and Hero wrinkled his nose. It was more than

just his own wound's scent-- there were scores upon scores of the wounded on the summit of the hill, with only a few healers running around, trying to save them.

Healers...

The wound's pain intensified as Hero pushed harder, his pace almost the same as it was as an uninjured cat now. Jayflight nearly stumbled as he accelerated, but quickly matched his pace.

The grass crunched underfoot, and Hero glanced down absently to realize that it was covered in dried blood-- the blood of the dead and dying on the top of the hill. And then the scent of death hit him, along with the cries of the mortally wounded and grieving...

It was the scene from a nightmare's nightmare.

Hero suddenly stumbled, his leg suddenly going numb as it failed completely. He collapsed, panting and groaning, beside another limp cat who looked strangely familiar, despite all the blood and burn marks coating their pelt.

The death scent hit him then, and he gagged. He noticed then, to his horror, that it was Duststar, the old MossClan leader. His brown, grey and white pelt was scarred almost beyond recognition, an eye was missing, and Hero realized by the bite marks that his Clanmates must have dragged him up here from the battlefield.

Hero tried to roll away from the sight, but his leg protested with loud screeches that ripped through his muzzle despite what he tried to contain it.

He noticed, then, that Jayflight's scent had disappeared. *She must've gone to get a Healer,* he told himself, but wasn't sure if he believed it. His trust in everyone had been shaken today-- no, it was broken beyond repair.

The scent of a cat suddenly drifted to him, smelling strangely of Lilypool, and his senses struggled to function. He blinked three times. An image appeared then, suddenly doubled, then slowly focused into a light ginger tabby looking at him in concern. "--hear

me? Can you hear me?"

Hero tried to nod, but even that small action made his vision swim again.

"Good, good. What's your name?"

"Hero," he tried to say, but the words never quite left his throat. Instead, he coughed violently as the smoke he'd inhaled seemed to catch up with him, and a trickle of red came with it.

I'm coughing blood, he thought absently. *How fascinating.*

Jayflight's scent suddenly washed over him, and he heard a sharp inhale.

The ginger tom turned and faced Jayflight, and asked "Do you know this cat? What's his name?"

"T-this is Hero," she choked out. "Oh, Hero...I-I didn't realize you were so bad...great StarClan, you might *die*...!"

Dying didn't sound that bad right now...he'd see Lilypool and Bling and Foxspring again, and his leg wouldn't hurt so bad. His eyes fluttered shut.

The pain suddenly began fading. In fact, his feeling was fading in general before he suddenly felt something wrap around his leg so tightly it forced his eyes open again. He gasped loudly in pain, then felt something get shoved into his mouth.

He vomited violently almost seconds later, the liquid coming out grey and black with the ash he'd inhaled and swallowed. He heard Jayflight retch and he forced his eyes open just in time to see her notice Duststar. She made a sort of strangled groan as she recognized him and sank to the ground in shock.

Something about the vomit and the bandage had woken him up, and he heard the voice of Tags over the groans of the wounded around him. He struggled to his feet, keeping the weight off his foreleg, and lurched toward the meeting that seemed to be underway. He stumbled suddenly, recovering quickly but wincing at

the bold of pain that shot through his leg.

Jayflight was at his side instantly. "What are you doing?!" she hissed.

"I need to know what's going on..." insisted Hero. Jayflight seemed to understand that there was no stopping him and instead pushed against him again to support him.

"...and I will act as temporary leader in his place," Tags was saying. Her tone was brisk and professional. "Any questions?"

"Where *is* Sunshine?" someone called.

Tags hesitated. "He...he's dead."

"What about Thug?"

Tags hesitated again. "He doesn't want to take power..."

Now a question rose from the back of the crowd. "But who killed Sunshine, huh? Did you, you power-hungry she-cat?" There were mews of agreement and outrage following the accusation, and Hero stepped forward, wincing as the wound pulsed slightly.

"It was Alpha," he mewed. "They killed each other." He paused, and the crowd roared up again, demanding an explanation. "I threw a crossbow at them. They fell over the edge."

He didn't feel like there was any need for long, drawn out descriptions, and besides, he didn't trust his brain to be able to manage that anyhow. Instead, he ended there, a note of finality in simple sentences he knew would strike clearer with the shell-shook cats of the Factions and Clans.

Now Thistlestar stepped forward, and the glance she shot toward Hero said it all-- that she'd gotten the story from Thug, that she knew all that had happened, that she felt responsible for all the dead. "As the City is no longer habitable, the Factions are welcome to stay with us," she mewed. Her gaze fell on Ghost and Foxy. "Haven, West Faction, would you like to stay with AshClan?"

The two Faction leaders nodded-- Ghost first, Foxy second. "Haven would love to stay with you," mewed Foxy quietly, glancing down at her paws.

Ghost flicked his tail. "West Faction as well."

Thistlestar nodded, turning to the group once more, "Jig--" she began, but was cut off almost instantly by the cat in question.

Jigsaw stood, his pelt coated in blood and singed on the ends. Yet he stood strong and firm, a true leader determined to save his group. "Hawkstar?" he asked.

The brown and ginger tom stood up, meeting Jigsaw's gaze hesitantly. "Yes?" he mewed cautiously.

Jigsaw dipped his head to the BreezeClan leader. "What's your territory like?"

Hawkstar blinked. "Moorland. Open. Grassy." His voice was hoarse from the smoke, and the single words seemed to be all he could force out of his tired lungs.

Jigasaw paused, then nodded to the rest of the North Faction. "We'll go with you," he mewed, turning back to the BreezeClan leader, who blinked and nodded his approval..

Thistlestart nodded, surprised but not disappointed. "Tags?"

Tags gestured with her tail to the WildClan leader. "We'll go with Silverstar," she mewed. Her voice was firm, final. Hero nodded slightly to himself at her choice. The darkness of WildClan would well suit the East Faction, and the two leaders would undoubtedly get along well, from what he'd seen of Silverstar.

Now Thistlestar hesitated. "MossClan..." She glanced toward the South Faction cats-- the cats that had murdered and killed their Clanmates and gang members, and the ones who had begun the war.

There was a silence. No one wanted to take in their enemies, the murderers who'd broken up families and scarred young eyes and

minds for all time. The South Faction members lowered their heads and shuffled their paws.

"We'll do it," mewed Rabbitflight suddenly. "The South Faction can stay with us. We didn't lose too many today..." His voice broke slightly and he half-turned to face the place where Duststar laid. His voice suddenly strengthened as he added, "and besides, blaming scared followers of an insane leader isn't fair to them, or anyone."

Hero blinked. Those were the last words he thought he'd hear from any cat, after this day. They were murderers, whether they were following a leader or not, and they had their own free will as well. Surely they could have rebelled, left their Faction?

But maybe he just didn't understand. There were many things he didn't-- why Clans were so tightly bound, why Faction members were so unwaveringly loyal. Why wouldn't they simply save their own necks instead of dying for simple friendships? It was a mystery to him, and would probably be until he died.

Which would be soon, now that he thought about it. *If my leg doesn't kill me first, it'll be my brain.*

Thistlestar was nodding in surprise, albeit slightly impatiently. "Good, good." She glanced quickly over to the wounded, and a look of worry crossed her features. "I-I'm going to check on the wounded," she mewed, her strong posture finally breaking as she padded over to the bodies of the dead and dying,

She's checking for her Clanmates, Hero realized. *I wonder how many lived through this...*

Jayflight suddenly straightened beside him. "Snowfeather! Swiftstorm!" she cried out in relief. "You're alive!"

A rush of relief came through Hero as he saw his friends, though the air was still sharp with the tang of blood.

We lived through this... he thought. *But at the cost of how many others?*

written by ember